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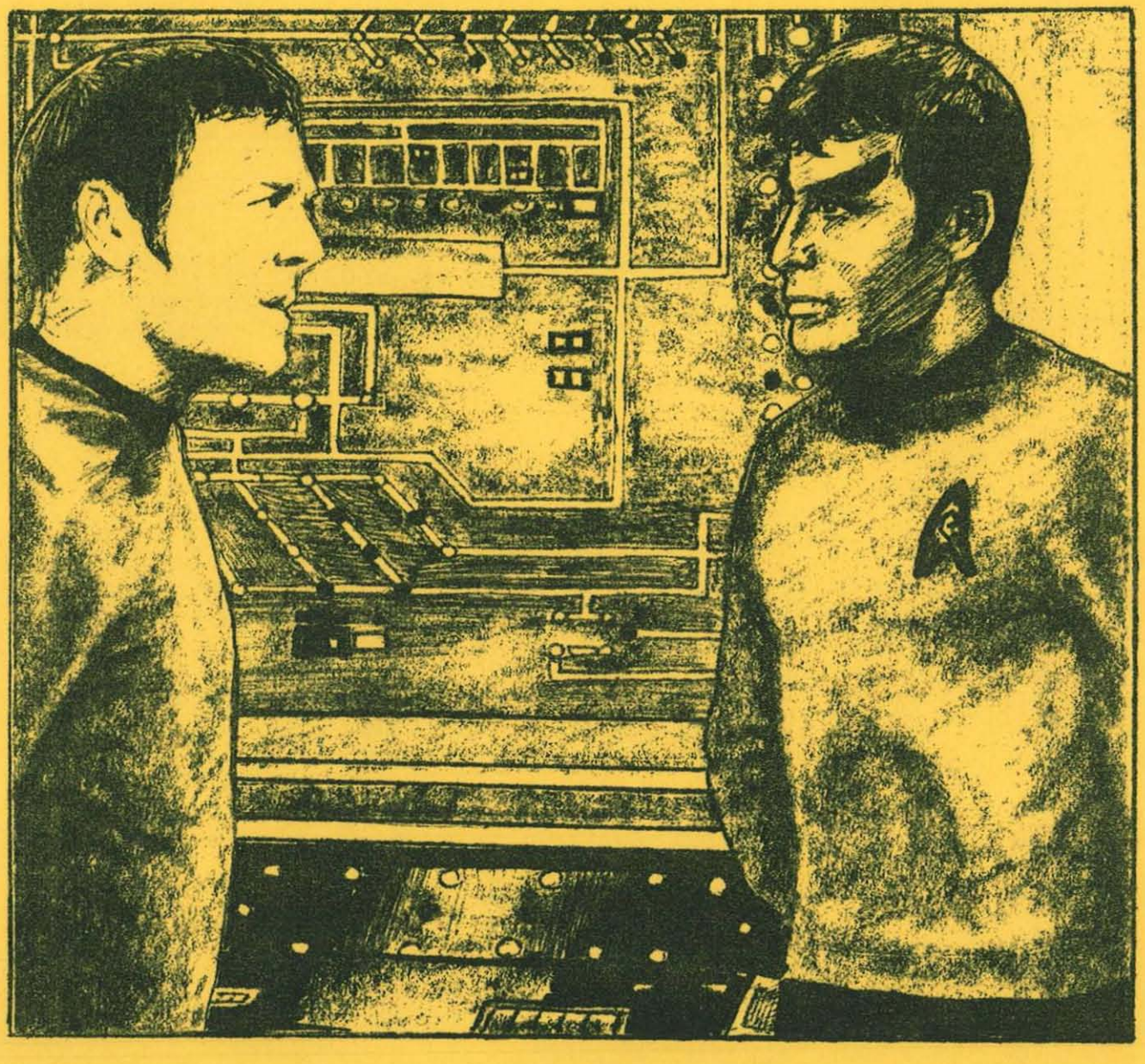
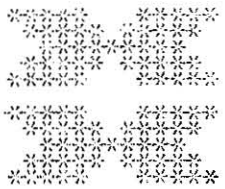
ACCEPTANCE



Vicki Richards

a STAR TREK fanzine



A C C E P T A N C E

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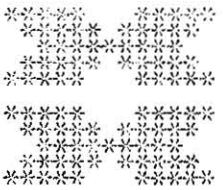

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona.

ACCEPTANCE

James Kirk handed over to the duty watch and left the Bridge for his cabin. It had been a long day, and he was more than a little tired. As he strode through the corridors, performing his usual nightly checks on his ship, he found he couldn't stop yawning and was very glad when he reached the peace and quiet of his quarters.

But as he stepped through the opening doors he realised his cabin wasn't entirely the haven of rest he wanted it to be at that moment. On his desk was a pile of papers, papers he had almost succeeded in forgetting about during the busy day, but papers, nevertheless, to which he would have to give at least a cursory glance before settling down to sleep; he suspected they were all routine, but you never knew, and it was, after all, another part of his job of Starship Captain.

With a resigned groan he slid into the chair behind the desk and began to sort through the rather large pile of papers.

After ten minutes, though, he was beginning to feel a little more cheerful, if no less tired; most of them seemed to be routine, as he had thought, and could safely be left until morning. He was just reading through the very last one - notifications of new crew members to be assigned to the Enterprise - when something caught his eye; something interesting. So Starfleet was planning to use him as a guinea pig again, was it. He shook his head; he supposed it was a kind of oblique flattery, but he hoped it wasn't going to cause any problems. Mentally he made a note to talk it over with McCoy in the morning, then changed his mind; Spock was the one to see, as well as the Doctor, as it was likely he was going to be affected as much as any of them by the new crew member Starfleet in its wisdom had assigned to the Enterprise.

But all that would have to wait for the morning. At the moment he had more important things to think about; sleep and dreams.

The simulated morning of the Enterprise came very quickly, as it always does for overworked Starship Captains, and James Kirk quickly prepared himself for the day, leaving his cabin a few minutes earlier than usual with the intention of finding Spock and discussing the new crew member's arrival with him before they both went on duty.

The Vulcan had also arisen early, and was just leaving his cabin next door as the Captain stepped out of his. Both said their good mornings, and the Captain informed his Vulcan First Officer that there was something he wished to discuss with him on their way to the Bridge.

"It's the new postings, Spock," Kirk said by way of explanation.. "There might be a problem with one of the new crew members."

Spock looked at Kirk speculatively, wondering what it was could be bothering his friend. Jim was one Captain respected by all his crew, past and present, and it didn't usually take very long for him to put new crew members at their ease. And Starfleet wasn't in the habit of assigning unfit crew to any Starship, let alone the Enterprise.

"I don't like experiments being carried out on the Enterprise, Spock," Kirk continued, "especially experiments which are likely to upset the crew, but it looks like that's what Starfleet has chosen us to do."

"In what way, Captain?"

Kirk looked at his friend closely, wondering how he was going to take the news, then decided that Spock would take it as Spock always did. "It seems that a new lieutenant is being appointed to Engineering to replace Jean Hodges. Scotty is miserable enough about losing one of his most promising lieutenants to the Hood, even though it means promotion to second in command for her in their Engineering section. I have a feeling this new lieutenant is going to put him into a sulk."

Spock gave Kirk one of his best disbelieving looks. The idea of the Chief Engineer 'in a sulk' didn't seem exactly in character. Except, of course, if the new crewmember happened to be incompetent where engines were concerned.

"It's not that his work isn't up to standard, in fact he comes highly recommended as far as his work is concerned," Kirk went on as if he knew what Spock was thinking. It wouldn't have been the first time. "It has to do with his...personality. Lt. Karon is of a rather unusual racial blend. He is a hybrid - half Human, half Klingon. According to the report, he is inclined at times to be...shall we say, difficult?"

Spock gave Kirk another incredulous look. "I expect that was an understatement, Captain," the Vulcan replied coolly,"and I should be extremely interested to hear how such a physiological make-up came about, and why he is a serving Starfleet officer."

The Vulcan's typical curiosity and - for Spock - astonished reaction to the news somehow made Kirk feel a lot better. "There are many equally unlikely possibilities which come to mind, Spock, I know; but the truth of the matter is, Karon is the result of a Klingon experiment. He was born in a test tube, to put it bluntly. Apparently, some years ago the Klingons decided it would be a good idea to breed hybrids such as Karon in an attempt to infiltrate the Federation, using them as spies. Such hybrids wouldn't be that easy to spot. Unfortunately for the Klingons, and for most of the hybrids, it appears that the Human side of their personalities proved the stronger, and they developed such traits as compassion, kindness and suchlike."

"And naturally the Klingons found such traits completely undesirable?" Spock put in.

Kirk nodded. "Exactly. Not the kind of thing the Klingons want to see in their young at all. Most of them were...eliminated. Karon escaped mainly due to his very high intelligence and ability to adapt. Even as a child he saw exactly what was going on around him, and allowed his elders to think that in him the Klingon half was dominant. So he was allowed to live, and began to train as an agent. The first chance he had when he was old enough, he stole a small ship and escaped from Klingon, though heaven knows how he managed that. First thing he did was defect to the Federation and join Starfleet."

"The Federation is completely sure of his loyalty?" Spock asked the obvious question.

"Completely. And Federation experts don't make that kind of mistake. No, his loyalty isn't in question, nor his ability as an engineer; in fact he's supposed to be quite brilliant."

"That, at least, ought to endear him to Mr. Scott." Spock knew Kirk would suspect him of making a joke, but it ought to lighten the atmosphere a little; Jim Kirk was taking his job too seriously, for a Human - as usual. But then that was one of the things that made him such an excellent commander.

The joke had the desired effect; Kirk grinned despite himself.

"If his ability is all Starfleet says, then what is the problem?" Spock knew Kirk too well to think that his Captain would be perturbed merely by the fact that the new crewmember was part Klingon.

"The problem - or problems - Spock are worse for Karon himself than for Starfleet, although what I'm really concerned about is the effect he's likely to have on the Enterprise because of his problems." Kirk looked at the Vulcan for a moment before going on. "You see, according to the report, Karon has the capability to make an excellent officer, maybe even a Chief Engineer in time; but only if he can sort himself out. It seems that a Klingon/Human hybrid has far more difficulties in balancing the two sides of his personality than you have."

"Naturally, Captain," Spock agreed without a moment's hesitation. "Karon would not have Vulcan mental disciplines at his disposal to aid him, and I should imagine that any being with even a small amount of Klingon ancestry would find things difficult."

"You've hit it right on the nail, Spock," Kirk nodded, glad that his friend understood, and certain that the Vulcan would offer his specialised knowledge t

help the new lieutenant once he arrived. Not that Kirk had ever had any doubts about Spock doing either.

"Karon," Kirk continued somewhat grimly, "is reputed to be one of the most awkward, stubborn, and generally pigheaded junior officers in the Fleet; apparently not many find it easy to get on with him. He tends to display markedly Klingon characteristics at times; yet Starfleet seem convinced that he will one day make an excellent officer. According to the medical experts, Karon just hasn't ever learned how to accept both his different halves; he wants to be Human, but isn't; and when he, naturally enough, behaves like a Klingon, he feels ashamed of himself and gets upset, which makes him worse. Not that he's ever done anything really dreadful; he wouldn't have made lieutenant if he had, but his behaviour is calculated to upset anyone and everyone serving with him, including himself. Starfleet seems to think we can sort him out. And has specially requested that you do what you can for him."

"I am the logical person to help, when my duties will allow it," Spock replied thoughtfully. "But will Karon see it that way? Perhaps I should discuss this with Dr. McCoy."

"I'm glad you said that, Spock; I think you and Bones ought to work together on this one. If we can't sort this Klingon/Human out, nobody can."

Their conversation ended just as the turbolift arrived at its destination, and they stepped out onto the Bridge to take up their respective positions and start the day in earnest. But as Kirk sat down in the command chair, he wondered if his optimism was justified; still in two days the new crewmembers would arrive, and they they would see. He just hoped there wasn't going to be too much trouble.

Two days later, right on time, the deep space shuttle carrying the new crewmembers assigned to the Enterprise requested permission to dock; permission was granted. The large shuttle completed the docking manoeuvre and the five new crew stepped out onto the Enterprise, every one of them feeling a mixture of expectation, trepidation and excitement at the prospect of serving on the finest ship in the Fleet, including the rather swarthy-looking lieutenant in red with the lightning-bolt of Engineering emblazoned upon his chest.

Karon stood silently in the corridor, listening to the yeoman telling them which quarters they were assigned to, and that Captain Kirk would be sure to greet them all personally as soon as he had time; that fitted in with what Karon had heard about his new Captain, and he was glad at least part of it appeared to be true. He hoped fervently that the rest was; if James Kirk was as open-minded as he was reputed to be, then maybe, just maybe, he might have the chance of making the grade in Starfleet. Karon had a nasty suspicion that this might be his last chance.

The other four joining the Enterprise along with him went off behind the yeoman who had spoken, and another Enterprise man led him off in a different direction. None of the others was even a junior officer, and for all but one of them, the Enterprise was their first posting. Naturally they had all been extremely excited at the thought of actually being aboard the most prestigious ship in the Fleet; but Karon had found their chatter more than slightly irritating; it had been one of those occasions when Human behaviour had annoyed him, although he hadn't showed it, and the fact that it had annoyed him worried him more than a little. He was not unaware of the importance of this posting, and even felt proud that he, Karon, of Klingon and Human ancestry, had actually made it onto the Enterprise despite all his problems; problems he was only too well aware of, and couldn't seem to do anything about. But he <u>had</u> to make a success of being on this ship. If he didn't, there wasn't really anywhere in the galaxy left where he might fit in. At the back of his mind the dejected thought wouldn't go away that he had long ago given up all hope of fitting in anywhere, even if he wouldn't admit it to himself.

As he followed the silent yeoman along the corridors he knew in his heart that this was probably one of the most significant days in his life; more significant, even, than the day he had escaped from the cruel planet that had given him life. Yet he could not bring himself to exult in the honour of becoming a member of the Enterprise crew as he should; he was certainly proud of his posting, but somehow the ghosts of his early years came back to him even at moments such as these; moments during his life, which had been few enough, when he might actually have felt wholeheartedly glad or happy about events otherwise.

In his worst moments he cursed the moment when some Klingon scientist had created him; cursed even more the politicians who had thought up the whole Klingon/Human hybrid scheme. Not that there was anything faintly unusual about being conceived in a test tube; such techniques had after all been employed in the galaxy for hundreds of years to the benefit of a great many; but the Klingons had cold-bloodedly set out to create him and others like him for their own evil purposes; no loving parents had been waiting to greet the miracle of his birth with gladness; no-one had ever greeted him with gladness - not for a good many years, anyway, and in such black moments Karon felt as though he was nothing more than the result of some grotesque experiment gone terribly wrong.

What was worse - there was no other like him in the whole universe. When the witchhunts had started and they had killed all the others like him for the Human traits they displayed, he had wanted to die too. His memories came crowding in on him like unforgiving masters; he remembered the day when his only true friend, Kolin, had been dragged away from the complex the hybrids had all lived in; he remembered his friend's face as he had been dragged away to be murdered for showing such terrible traits as kindness; Karon had warned him, had told him what would happen. But Kolin just hadn't been able to hide the goodness within him.

Karon was not at all certain at times whether there was goodness in him or not; for sanity's sake he had to believe in himself, believe in his worth as a person, no matter what his background was; after all, the diversity of races in the galaxy proved that being different wasn't a crime. The philosophy behind the Federation worlds' ability to get on with one another despite - or even because of - their differences was one of the things that had attracted him to the UFP in the first place; on Klingon, to be different was to be at fault; sometimes with fatal results, as Kolin had discovered. Klingon was the only world that was right; Klingon beliefs the only true ones; the Klingon creed of war the only way. And woe betide anyone who didn't conform.

But Karon had been too clever for them; unlike Kolin, Karon possessed a little more of the Klingon capacity for cunning; he had seen in childhood the way things were leading; he had tried to warn his fellow hybrids, but they hadn't believed him, not believing that even the Klingons who had created them could be so evil as put them all to death.

But Karon had known, and he had been prepared when the time came. He had acted his part well down the years, and when the hybrids reached adolescence and the killings began, those Klingons who had been set to watch over them firmly believed that Karon was the only individual out of the whole experiment who had the necessary qualifications to carry out the purposes for which his birth had been ordered.

Sometimes Karon wondered whether it had all been an act; his Human half made him constantly question whether or not there really was more Klingon in him than had been in the others; the thought did not please him.

Yet without that cunning he would never have survived, would never have been able to pretend to train for the mission ahead of him as diligently as he had.

But the training hadn't been totally useless; when his masters had begun to instruct him in the ways of the Federation worlds he would have to infiltrate he had been able to see behind the concocted propoganda to the truth behind; he found a way of life that was, at last, right, and discovered he wasn't the only one in the universe who believed the Klingon way was wrong.

It had taken many months of planning, many years of training, and many, many long days of sickening pretence before he had been able to worm his way into a position where he was both able to gain access to a ship and make his escape from the hated planet where he had spent all his life.

That too had been a significant day, and one he had barely survived. If he hadn't had the advantage of surprise, he doubted whether he could ever have got away at all, notwithstanding the excellent pilot training his Klingon masters had thoughtfully given him. But he had made it, and having eventually lost his pursuers by the tried and trusted technique of going into hyperspace at the critical moment, he turned up finally at the nearest Starbase in a badly battle-scarred ship and had asked for what his Human ancestors would have called 'political asylum'.

He hadn't actually been a great deal of help information-wise to the Federation; his training hadn't got to the stage where it had been necessary to tell him any real secrets. So he had been more than grateful - unbelieving, even - when after a long interrogation which had been more thorough than discomforting he was taken in by the arms of the UFP.

But his problems were far from over, even when he entered Starfleet Academy to train for Starship service. He was a little older than most of the other students, but he had the advantage of a good scientific grounding; the Klingons might have been cruel, but they had known what they were about. Perhaps it was because he went through the Academy in half the time he should have done that made his fellow students resent him.

In the beginning he had tried, he had tried so hard to let his Human half emerge a little after years of suppression so that he might make friends with the other students; but all that had happened was that his released Human emotions made him more sensitive to the resentment and distrust that was shown him. Karon had been hurt, and had gone back into his shell. But he didn't blame them. After all, who could like a Klingon?

But it was at the Academy that he had discovered his love of engineering. The day he realised he wanted above all other things to be an engineer on a Starship was one of the few precious memories he had. And perhaps somewhere at the back of his mind, somewhere deep in his soul he hadn't quite given up hope of finding a home somewhere, some day. Perhaps between the stars.

So he had graduated from the Academy with high marks and they had tried and tried again to find a place within Starfleet where he might fit in. After months of being shifted from one place to another he had begun to gain a reputation of being 'difficult'. Karon had known it wasn't entirely justified, but after all, they couldn't blame him for being part Klingon, could they? He certainly couldn't help it.

Eventually, when it seemed that there was no place left to go: none of the smaller ships or planet-based Federation outposts left that would take him, he had received the amazing news that he was to be posted to a real Starship, and no less a Starship than the Enterprise. He had wondered about that, wondered if some official had got the postings mixed. But either way, he wasn't going to let this last, best chance slip through his fingers.

The yeoman and Karon arrived at the Klingon/Human's designated quarters. Karon managed to remember to thank the yeoman in a suitably Human manner, and entered, glad of a few moments to himself away from others; a few moments to calm himself down and regain control of his overstretched nerves before it was time for him to report to the Enterprise's sickbay for his obligatory medical. And after that he was to report immediately to engineering.

He wasn't all that keen on meeting his superior, Commander Scott; from all accounts the Enterprise's Chief Engineer was an exacting man, and Karon was convinced he was bound to do something that didn't quite come up to standard, or upset him in some way; he always did seem to upset people, no matter how hard he tried not to. But he consoled himself with the thought that soon he would be

helping to look after the great warp engines of the Starship; a thought that cheered him immeasurably. He always had got on with engines better than people.

The few minutes solitude didn't really make him feel much better though, and a short while later the new lieutenant left for sickbay, grimly wondering what kind of reception a Klingon/Human hybrid was going to get from a busy Starship medical officer who would have to recalibrate all his instruments just to give him the statutory check-up.

"Well, Bones; what do you think of our new lieutenant so far?" Kirk asked McCoy affably as he sat down to join him in the crowded mess, setting down his tray carefully and beginning to munch his dinner before McCoy had got round to formulating a proper answer.

"I've only seen him for the few minutes it took me to perform his medical, so far, Jim." McCoy frowned slightly, unable to think of the exact words to describe the unusual-looking, rather over-anxious young man who had gone through his medical hardly speaking a word.

"I had to recalibrate my instruments, of course," McCoy continued, "but after years of doing it for Spock, it wasn't that much trouble; a Klingon/Human hybrid isn't as difficult as a Vulcan/Human to deal with, medically speaking; at least his heart's on the proper place, and actually his and Spock's physiologies are interesting to study. But don't you ever tell Spock I said that!"

"Then you haven't encountered any problems?" Kirk asked, grinning. "When I met Karon in the corridor a little while ago and welcomed him to the ship, he looked absolutely terrified. Polite enough, though."

"I didn't say I hadn't come across any problems," McCoy replied, thoughtful again. "Physically he's fine, but mentally...I'm not sure. Certainly he's perfectly sane by most standards, and probably brilliant. But he isn't at all normal when it comes to his personality. According to what I can tell from the tests I ran, though they weren't extensive - only the normal psychological tests I've run on every new crew member - the two sides of his personality aren't at all at peace with one another. I used to think Spock was mixed up when I first came on the Enterprise; but Spock was never like Karon. Actually, I must see Spock and talk it over with him; I said I would when I'd done the medicals. If anyone can help Karon, it's Spock. He understands the problem better than anyone; certainly better than Karon himself does. Though I doubt that he'll ever be able to balance the two sides of his personality as well as Spock does."

Kirk nodded his head, considering. It was a constant source of relief to him and McCoy that their Vulcan friend had finally found himself. "Yes, Bones; but Karon's not Vulcan, after all."

"No - he's half Klingon. And that's the real problem. You mark my words, Jim; Karon's not going to be here for very long before he does something Klingon, and he, and the other members of the crew, won't like it."

"I know, Bones; that's what I'm waiting for too. I just hope that when it does happen we can do something to help him. This really is his last chance to be accepted for active Starship duty. If he fails to be accepted on the Enterprise, I don't know what will happen to him. I can't see Karon being happy in a planetbound job, can you?"

The great warp drive engines of the Starship hummed away steadily, taking the Enterprise through deep space towards her next destination. Karon finished checking that the matter/antimatter control was operating correctly, which it was, then crossed over to the other side of the vast engineering complex to begin his next assignment.

As he walked he noted the quiet efficiency which marked the way every department was run on this Starship; he had to admit to himself that everything

he had heard about the Enterprise had so far proved true, and he was as near to feeling truly happy as he had ever been in his life; the great engines were here for him to tend, and it seemed that Mr. Scott was at least a little pleased with him, though the man was inclined to be a little gruff. Not that he wasn't gruff himself on occasions; but at least the Chief Engineer loved his engines, calling them by some vague Terran/Scottish term, and Karon had to respect the man's brilliance in the engineering field.

He had even met the Captain without anything too dreadful happening, and had actually got through that encounter without doing or saying anything inadvertently that a Terran would find rude. As to when he next met the Captain - well, he would just have to get over that obstacle when the time came. For the moment he had the engines, and his work, and most of the Engineering personnel left him alone. Which was the way he wanted it. No, thought Karon, life on the Enterprise was not too bad at all.

"Laddie - come over here a minute!" The command came from Engineer Scott, but it was a few seconds before Karon realised his superior was referring to him. Sometimes Mr. Scott's terminology confused him a little.

Karon finished what he was doing and then crossed over to where the Chief Engineer stood examining a row of data banks crucial to the keeping of a close watch on the rate of decay of the dilithium crystals.

"Yes, sir? You wanted something?" Karon knew his voice always sounded somewhat gruff to Humans, a fact he was keenly aware of. He hoped that Mr. Scott had the insight to see that his thoughts didn't match his tone.

"Aye, laddie, I do," Scotty replied in as friendly a manner as he could. He had to admit he was a little worried about Lt. Karon; the laddie was good enough at his work, the best new engineering lieutenant he'd had assigned to him in a long while. But the laddie was so...withdrawn and uncommunicative. Not unfriendly, exactly. It was hard to put a finger on it, but Scotty knew that the other crewmembers felt a little uncomfortable in Karon's presence. No wonder the poor laddie felt a bit lonely and confused. And that wasn't surprising, considering his background.

"I want you to describe how this unit works to me," Scotty continued. "A kind of test, you understand, for my report to the Captain. There has to be one on every new crew member, ye know."

Karon looked closely at the Engineer, then decided, somewhat to his surprise, that his superior was asking him in a pleasant, almost friendly manner. Unfortunately, Karon didn't know how to respond. In a gruff - to Scotty's ears, at least - manner, Karon began to describe, in the minutest of detail, exactly how the unit was designed and operated. He didn't know it, but he gave an explanation more accurate and detailed than any new crewmember had ever done before. Scotty, if he hadn't been impressed before, was now.

"Verra good, Karon; that'll do fine." The Chief Engineer gave the Lieutenant a nod, then moved on to his next piece of work, gratified as to Karon's work but a bit put out that his tentative offer of friendship had been rebuffed. The half-Klingon was worse to try and make friends with than a Vulcan! Scotty wasn't at all sure that he'd bother again. If Karon wanted to be left alone, then that suited him fine.

Karon watched him go, feeling very uncomfortable inside, fully aware that he had just messed up his chance of getting to know someone. But it wasn't his fault! He couldn't help that he'd been born as he was! The Humans didn't understand!

Bitterly, Karon turned away and went to carry on with his routine work. If he hadn't been so worked up inside he would have noticed the rather unusual arrangement of the circuitry he was about to check, and the surreptitious glances that followed him from various parts of the Engineering complex.

As it was he opened the inspection hatch without noticing anything untoward

and was promptly thrown back several feet by a plain old electric shock, accompanied by a rather loud bang and theatrical flash.

He landed in a bemused, angry heap at Mr. Scott's feet. The Chief Engineer began to haul him to his feet, and didn't seem at all pleased. And then Karon noticed that someone was sniggering.

"I want to know who was responsible for this!" Scotty was demanding in an icy tone. "Practical jokes are all very well, BUT NOT WHEN THEY INTERFERE WITH THE RUNNING OF ENGINEERING! Besides that, Lt. Karon could have been hurt! I will find out who did this, so you had better tell me now!" Scotty was really angry; angrier than any of the Engineering personnel had ever seen him, so much so that they were beginning to think that maybe they should have foregone the usual practical joke on the new crew member. But that half-Klingon had been so stuck-up they just couldn't resist it.

As for Karon, he stood shaking his head to clear it, half supported by Scotty, only just taking it in that the 'accident' hadn't been accidental at all, and had actually been something his fellow crew members had done to him on purpose.

His head was beginning to clear now, but instead of filling with rational thoughts, it began to fill with the kind of indescribable rage he knew to come from the half of his personality he tried to suppress. But he didn't try to suppress it this time; the wretched Humans had dared to make him, Karon, look a fool, and they were going to pay for it!

Knowing full well that when he had calmed down he would regret what he was about to do and say, but neither able to nor caring to do anything about it, Karon drew himself up to his full, not inconsiderable height, shook Scotty's arm off rather roughly and turned to glare at what he imagined were the perpetrators of the dreadful deed.

When he turned, the personnel of the Enterprise's Engineering department couldn't help but shiver a little; Karon looked furious, full of hatred, and dangerous; and no longer only half Klingon.

"How dare you do this to me!" Karon's voice was filled with rage, and more accented than it had been before. "You - you Terran worms! Earthers! You are not fit for me to work alongside you! That I should ever have thought to find a place here! I will show you what Klingons do to people who misuse them!"

Karon was so furious he was barely coherent; having again roughly shaken off Scotty, who had been attempting to calm him down, and causing the Chief Engineer to stagger and almost fall over, he advanced on the group of goggling Engineering personnel in front of him, but not before he had picked up a heavy wrench lying on the floor nearby. The person who had left it there when the rumpus started instantly vowed always to listen to Mr. Scott's advice about always putting things away in future. That was, if any of then had any future once Karon had finished with them. He was only half-Klingon; but he looked so frightening!

Karon swung a heavy blow at the nearest red shirt he could see, but either he was too furious to control his reaction properly or else his Human half was still tempering his actions in some way, for he missed his target completely and had trouble staying upright himself.

Scotty didn't want to call Security and have Karon ending up on a charge; he probably would anyway, but Scotty didn't want so promising an engineer to end up in trouble. Yet how was he to stop the enraged dervish in front of him from knocking about half his personnel and probably damaging some of the engineering equipment as well? Scotty couldn't have that; without thinking what Karon might do to him in his rage, he stepped in and tried to disarm the hybrid.

Several others followed Scotty's lead, and joined in. But what started as an attempt to stop any fighting turned into an all-out brawl, with Karon on one side and the reat of Engineering on the other.

Karon was in no mood to allow himself to be disarmed, and the puny efforts of the Humans to do so only enraged him more. The fight in Engineering was beginning to look as if it might turn ugly.

In the open doorway stood a figure barely able to credit what he was seeing. Spock had been on his way to help Scotty with a technical problem the Engineer wanted him to see, and had planned to use his visit to see for himself how Karon was settling down, and perhaps have a few words with him if possible. Both Kirk and McCoy had felt vaguely uneasy about the Klingon/Human hybrid; both had suspected that some sort of incident was bound to happen sooner or later.

But Spock had been in a difficult position about approaching Karon; the hybrid was likely to be sensitive, and any suspicion that his private affairs were being interfered with would probably drive him into his shell or else merely make him furious. And anyone with a small amount of Klingon ancestry was liable to regard every enquiry into his welfare as interference with his privacy, as Kirk had pointed out. He and McCoy had left it up to Spock to decide how best to approach him, and Spock had decided to do so cautiously, and had left speaking to Karon for a few days.

But from where Spock was standing just now it looked as if he might have left it a little too long. And if he didn't do something, several members of the Engineering department were going to get hurt.

No-one had seen the First Officer's silent entrance; they were too intent on avoiding the heavy, if wild, blows that Karon was aiming at them, and looking for an opportunity to grab him and restrain him. Karon, however, was just too strong and too enraged for them to do any such thing, and the fight looked as if it might continue indefinitely until a tall figure in blue suddenly appeared from nowhere and seized Karon by his wrench-wielding arm. No-one was more surprised at this intervention than Karon himself, who forgot to try and strike everything in sight and whirled to see who had his arm in such a vice-like grip.

"Lt. Karon," said Spock at his iciest Vulcan best, "I suggest you give me that wrench before you hurt either yourself or someone else."

Karon was so amazed that anyone had the nerve or the strength to challenge him that he meekly handed the tool over. He was not surprised, though, that the person who had dared to challenge him was the Vulcan First Officer. Karon had been both wanting to and yet terrified of meeting the famous Mr. Spock ever since hearing he was being assigned to the Enterprise. And now he had met him in such circumstances, and the only expression he could read in the dark eyes was one of deep disapproval. And Karon couldn't blame him. The Vulcan had been a figure he respected, and now to feel his censure was too much for a proud Klingon. Karon's Human side was rapidly emerging again, and his rage had given way to deep humiliation. He had done it again, and this time he wouldn't get another chance.

"What happened here?" Karon looked up miserably from contemplating his feet to realise that the Vulcan was questioning Mr. Scott.

"It wisnae all the laddie's fault, Mr. Spock," Scott was saying quietly though still rather angrily, "though I'll no have anyone behaving like that in Engineering! Something might get damaged. But Karon didn't start it - some fool played a practical joke on him, and the laddie got an electric shock. I would have got angry myself if someone had done that to me. And I intend to find out who did it." Scotty glared at everyone in sight witheringly. No-one had better so much as whisper anything out of place around him the rest of that day, especially where Karon was concerned. Scotty knew that Starfleet was relying on the Captain and the Enterprise to sort Karon out.

"Please come with me." Spock gave Karon a look that indicated his request was an order.

The First Officer led the now meek Karon out of the Engineering complex. As the doors closed behind them, Spock heard excited chatter breaking out, and Scotty's firm command to get back to work.

Spock made for the nearest turbolift, with Karon trotting obediently behind, too bemused and miserable even to think of asking where the First Officer was taking him. It was only when the Vulcan's order to take them to Deck 5 pierced his dark thoughts that Karon realised Mr. Spock wasn't taking him to the brig after all.

Now where was he taking him? The Captain's quarters? That had to be it. Spock would tell the Captain what had happened and that would be it; he would be out of the service; a dishonourable discharge. And what in the galaxy would there be left for him then? And it was all his own fault. Karon felt like weeping, but his Klingon half wouldn't let him.

What was the First Officer thinking? He had hardly spoken two words to him since he had taken the wrench from his hand in Engineering. How could he have done that? Karon flinched inwardly at the memory. He knew very well how he could have done it. But they shouldn't have played that trick on him. Miserably he followed Spock out of the turbolift onto Deck 5. The Vulcan's silent condemnation was worse to bear than if he had been outright offensive.

Karon's limited knowledge of Vulcans was as scant as his comprehension of Spock's thoughts about him; and when the Vulcan didn't stop at Kirk's quarters, but instead stopped outside the cabin next door, the Klingon/Human was completely bewildered. It was not until the First Officer politely requested him to step inside that he realised these were Commander Spock's own quarters. Dumbly he followed the Vulcan inside, more befuddled than ever.

"It is time we had a serious discussion, Lt. Karon," Spock was saying, gesturing Karon to sit, while he stood with his hands clasped behind his back. "Judging from the regrettable display I witnessed in Engineering, there are grave problems which you must solve, and solve in the near future, or I fear your career in Starfleet will not progress much further."

Karon just sat and stared at Spock, unable to speak or to know what to say. What did the Vulcan mean? If he didn't solve his problems his career would be over? Did he mean it wasn't over already? Clinging to that thread of hope, Karon tried to pay attention to what Spock was saying.

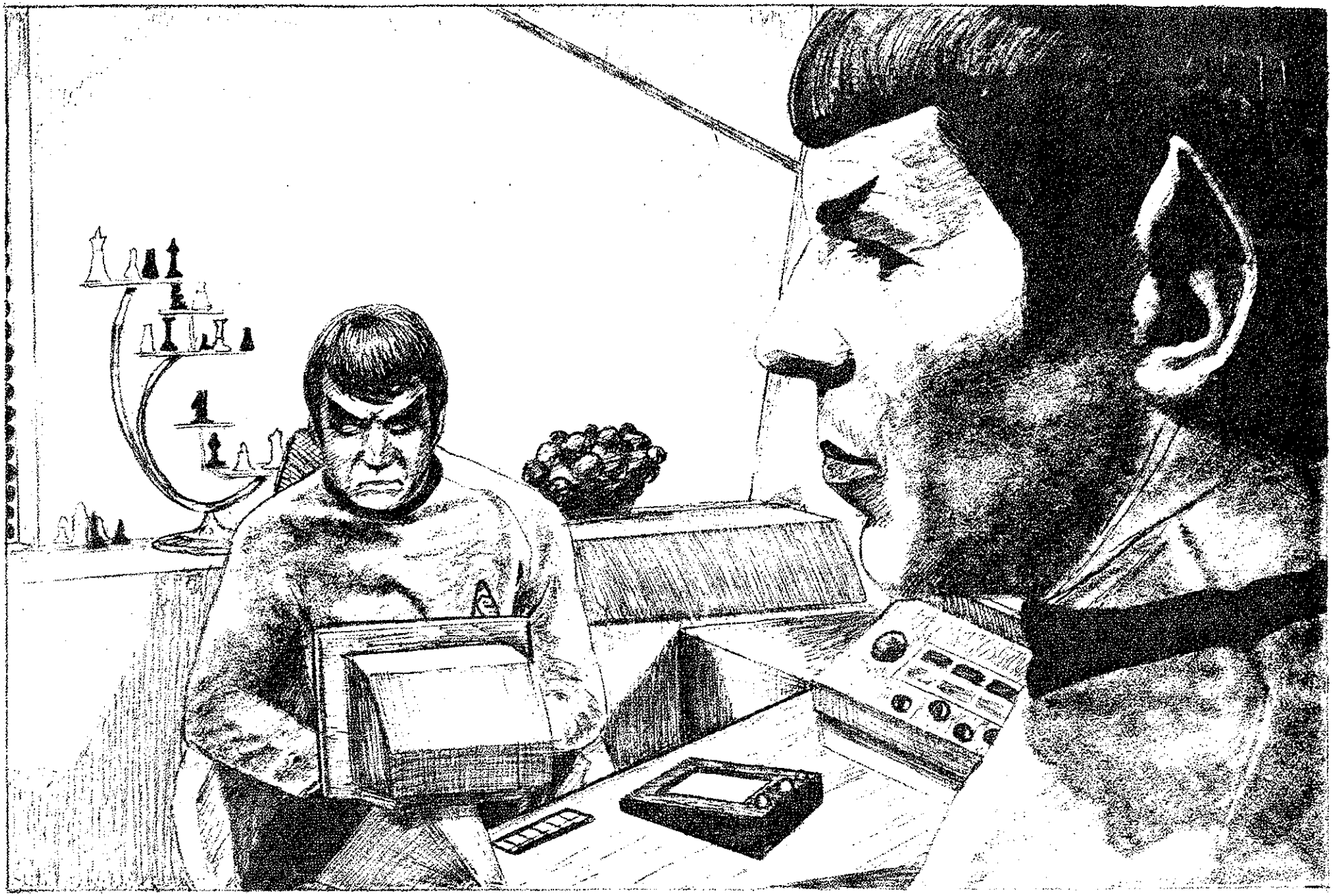
"It is clear to me that your...shall we say, behavioural problems, stem from the two halves of your personality failing to integrate properly. You realise that I am not unfamiliar with such problems myself?" Spock waited for Karon to answer.

Karon nodded uncertainly. He had somehow forgotten that one of the reasons he had wanted to meet the First Officer was because he was also a hybrid, and one of the reasons he had dreaded meeting him was because Spock was a hybrid who had succeeded in a way Karon didn't think he ever could. Yet Spock seemed so Vulcan, so in control; perhaps he could help him, if no-one else could. If only a miracle happened and he could stay aboard the Enterprise! And then Karon realised that he hadn't considered Spock understood at least part of his problems because he had been too wrapped up in himself to even think about other people's difficulties. At that moment Karon took the first step towards seeing himself clearly, maybe for the first time.

"I understand your irritation with the practical joke played on you," Spock was continuing. "I must confess I have always found the Human penchant for such pranks highly illogical. But you must understand that such things are almost a tradition with Humans, where new members of the crew are concerned. It is not to be taken seriously, though I suspect Mr. Scott will take them to task about the incident. However, I realise it was the Klingon side of your personality which, in part, caused you to react the way you did. I believe you now feel ashamed of your behaviour?"

Karon nodded dejectedly.

"Very good." Spock also nodded, apparently satisfied with his answer. "It is clear that you cannot remain a useful member of a Starship crew unless you learn to integrate your personality better than you have up until now. I may be



able to help you, if you will allow it."

Spock regarded the dejected young lieutenant sitting miserably in front of him and wondered what Karon's answer would be. He couldn't help him if Karon didn't agree to it; he wasn't completely certain he could help him anyway. Spock understood very well the difficulties Karon must have faced during his life; in some ways they must have been greater that those Spock himself had experienced; and Karon's Klingon half obviously distressed him equally as much as Spock's Human side had ever distressed him. But that had been before the Enterprise and meeting James Kirk...and, he admitted to himself, Leonard McCoy also. Perhaps he could pass on at least part of the lessons he had learned during these last few years to Karon. It might cost him the price of letting the Klingon/Human know some of his private thoughts; but knowing how truly hopeless Karon felt, it was a price Spock would have no hesitation in paying. That was if Karon allowed him to help.

"You - you see," Karon was beginning in a strangled voice, "I - I just can't help it! When I get angry I just can't stop myself! How can you help?"

Karon's outcry might have sounded like an accusation to another, but Spock recognised it for what it was; a plea for Spock to tell him that he really could help.

"Perhaps because it is only in the last few years that I have been able to reconcile the two halves of my personality."

Karon just stared at Spock dumbly; that thought had never occurred to him. That the Vulcan could ever have felt even a little as wretched as he?

"If...if you could help me; I don't know if you can, if anyone can. But if you could - I should be grateful forever."

For the next hour Karon poured out to Spock all the pent-up misery of his whole lifetime; his feelings of not belonging anywhere; how he had been treated as an oddity, even a freak by the Klingons who had caused him to be born; of his revulsion at their way of life. And how, when he had finally achieved the impossible and escaped to the Federation, almost losing his life in the process, he had actually been accepted by the Academy. But his hopes had soon been dashed; it seemed that all Humans, all other races, all mistrusted him because of his Klingon ancestry. Ancestry? That was a laugh! He hadn't even had parents! How could anyone in the galaxy understand how he felt, understand the loneli ness? He didn't have a friend anywhere, not even himself, for how could he like himself when he was capable of outbursts like the one just now in Engineering. If it hadn't been for his work, he would have gone mad long ago. And now, if he had to leave Starfleet? He just didn't know. One thing he didn't have was hope. It wasn't a plea for Spock to somehow intercede on his behalf; it was a simple statement of facts.

Yet when Karon left the Vulcan's cabin, somehow he didn't feel so hopeless any more. Perhaps it was the quiet way Commander Spock had told him that he did understand, that his problems were not unsolvable. Karon wasn't sure, but he knew he felt better; and the First Officer had seemed confident that he would be allowed to stay on the Enterprise. His offer to teach him something of Vulcan mental disciplines might really be of help; and it had touched Karon. As he stood alone in the corridor, he realised how selfless it had been of Mr. Spock to take him into his private quarters and to tell him how he had had similar problems; for a Vulcan, a great sacrifice of privacy. But it was Spock's insistence that acceptance, not suppression, of his Klingon side was the key to finding himself that affected him most; it seemed the only answer, and one he had never considered as being possible. He didn't know if he could do it, but he had to try.

And if Mr. Spock had found his answers, then perhaps Karon could find at least a few of his own. At least he no longer felt quite so alone; someone had

understood. And if the Vulcan had found friends and a home on board the Enterprise, perhaps he could also.

Karon turned and walked quietly back to his quarters.

"How is our problem, Spock?" Kirk looked up from his command chair expectantly. Scotty had naturally informed him of the fracas in Engineering, plus the fact that Spock had stopped it and taken Karon off somewhere.

"Confused, but calmer. I think there may be no further trouble in that quarter, Captain; at least, no serious trouble." Spock had known instantly to what James Kirk was referring, and answered as obliquely as the Captain had asked the question. The Enterprise grapevine needed no encouragement.

"Perhaps not on that score - and thanks, Spock; Scotty says he'd be sorry to lose him. But it seems we do have a problem with someone in Engineering; practical jokes are one thing, but this seems to have been a little more. I'll have to look into it."

Their quiet conversation finished, Spock crossed over to his library computer station, knowing that Kirk would want a fuller report later. Kirk watched him go thoughtfully, wondering what his Vulcan friend had said to Karon, and knowing that if Spock's advice to him went for nothing, Karon really would have to go. But Spock had said that he thought it might be all right now; that, at least, made him feel a little easier about the situation.

When Karon returned to duty the Engineer immediately gave him a task on the Bridge. Mr. Scott didn't seem particularly unfriendly towards him, even after what had happened, merely a little gruff. Karon, surprised and a little humble at not being bawled out, listened to his orders quietly and then left for the Bridge with no other comment than, "Aye, sir."

He wasn't exactly sure for whose sake Mr. Scott was keeping him out of Engineering, but in the light of his new resolution he decided to give the Engineer's motives the benefit of the doubt. Either way, his shift for the day would end with his period on the Bridge, and then he would be able to retire to his cabin for some peace and quiet to sooth his battered nerves.

It was only the third time he had had occasion to work on the bridge; the first two he had to admit had been a little nerve-wracking. Not that his work had been anything less than perfect, or that he had had any fears that it would not be so; but working in the presence of the Captain and the rest of that amazing Bridge crew had been a little awe-inspiring, to say the least. Karon had never been subject to an inferiority complex, but on those two occasions he had felt in distinct danger of developing one.

Yet now he had met and talked with Mr. Spock, he found he really did feel different, almost glad, in fact, that he could escape to the Bridge and not have to face his colleagues in Engineering, for a little while at least. From what he now knew of the Vulcan, and had gathered of the Captain, he was certain that no-one there would either laugh at or look down on him. And while he did experience a certain amount of trepidation at the thought of stepping out alone onto the nerve centre of the Enterprise again, as he rode in the turbolift he also felt a great sense of relief.

Karon's thoughts and mental preparation for stepping onto the Bridge and facing the Captain, who might or might not have known by that time of the fracas in Engineering, were interrupted by the turbolift stopping to admit more passengers. The doors opened and in popped the Helmsman and the Navigator, accompanied by the Chief Communications Officer.

Karon had never seen the latter before, and now that he had seen her, he desperately wanted to say hello. Unfortunately, fear of being ignored for what he was prevented him from uttering a word.

But Uhura was not bound by any such notions. Karon's ancestry was written all over his face, and she had immediately realised who he was. The Enterprise grapevine had it that the new Engineering lieutenant was a little difficult, to say the least, but she wasn't going to be put off by any such preconceived ideas. Not Uhura. Besides, she thought he looked a little...lonely.

"Hello - you're Karon, aren't you? I'm glad to meet you."

"Oh. Hello." Karon's surprise at her words and her smile rendered him partially speechless.

"Yes, we're all pleased to meet you." Sulu followed Uhura's lead and extended a hand. The Helmsman's insight told him that here was a man who had very great difficulty in relating to other people. Well, if he needed help, Sulu was certain to give him any he could.

Completely speechless, Karon took the proffered hand and shook it.

"You are Lt. Sulu?" Karon knew perfectly well what the Helmsman was called, but it was the only thing his tongue would permit him to say at that moment.

"He's Sulu, and I'm Chekov." The Navigator grinned and also held out a hand.

Karon shook Chekov's hand, and attempted to mumble that he was pleased to meet them, too. It was the first time in he didn't know how long that anyone had showed him the slightest sign of friendship, apart from the kindness the Vulcan had shown him. He didn't know it, but it was the first time he had actually been able to recognise an offer of friendship for what it was.

Any further conversation was prevented by the turbolift arriving at the Bridge. The other three officers got out and went to their stations. Karon walked briskly to the Engineering station. As he came within the Captain's line of vision, James Kirk greeted him with a slight smile. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the Vulcan nod to him.

More astonished than ever, Karon made his way to his station in complete confusion.

His shift on the Bridge passed uneventfully and quietly; he had no need to converse with anyone and manned his station competently and almost joyfully. Never before had he felt so at home anywhere as he did at that moment; his remaining fear of reprimand from the Captain and his confusion at the three officers' reactions notwithstanding, for the first time in his life he began to think that maybe, just maybe, it might all turn out all right.

James Kirk had indeed been observing Karon carefully, though Karon himself would never realise that; the Captain was far too careful to allow the over-sensitive Klingon/Human to realise that he was under scrutiny, however open-minded. Kirk knew as much about Karon's life history as anyone aboard the Enterprise, except perhaps McCoy, who had naturally read the report and, of course, Spock, and Kirk thought he could well understand the inner turmoil Karon must constantly be going through; it was a shame he couldn't let the rest of the crew know just what the new lieutenant had had to put up with during his lifetime; they might be a little more sympathetic. But that would have meant a grave breach of confidence. No, Karon would have to come to terms with his dual personality even as Spock had done, and Kirk hoped that his Vulcan friend's talk with the Klingon/Human might have helped as much as Spock had thought.

Spock himself had noticed Kirk's quiet observation, if nobody else on the Bridge had done, and echoed the Captain's thoughts. If Kirk understood even a little of what Karon had gone through, then Spock understood completely. Karon hadn't had the same problems as Spock; in some ways he had experienced worse problems than the Vulcan, though in other ways it was Spock who had had the harder time; but he knew exactly the inner torment Karon was going through, had been going through all his life. He didn't really know if his long talk with the Klingon/Human had helped enough, but he hoped so; for once, Spock didn't see what else he could do. As the Vulcan had found, there were some answers only Karon could find for himself.

Uhura also watched Karon when her duties permitted her to look that way for a few seconds. Once he caught her looking, so she gave him a friendly smile. For a moment she thought he was going to smile back, but then he had quickly looked back to what he was doing.

Damn the man! she thought, if he's going to be so unfriendly... but immediately changed her mind when she saw Spock looking at her. She too understood in that moment how Karon must feel, and resolved to try and make a friend of him if it took her months. No-one ought to feel that lonely and wretched, and Karon from all accounts didn't have a single friend.

As she worked at her console she considered what to do. It seemed it was going to take a lot more than a simple 'hello' to get Karon talking. She would have to enlist Sulu's and Chekov's help; and Christine's. As soon as she thought of her three friends she had a blinding flash of inspiration. She and the others had planned to meet in the Officer's Lounge that evening for a small get-together; not for any special purpose, just for a few hours' relaxation in pleasant company. But if they made it into a real party, and invited Karon? It might not work; Karon might not agree to come, and she didn't know what the others would think of her idea. But it was worth a try.

Eventually it was time for Karon to finish his shift and go off duty. As he left the Bridge the Captain nodded to him and smiled again. Karon nodded formally back. He was just about to step into the waiting turbolift when the Communications Officer spoke to him.

"Oh - Mr. Karon," she said sweetly, "Chekov, Sulu and I and a few others are holding a small party in the Officer's Lounge this evening. We'd be very happy if you'd come too."

Karon halted and looked at her. He didn't know what to say, nor what to think. There was no mistaking the fact that she really did seem as if she wanted him to come.

"I..... Thank you, Lieutenant," he finally mumbled before gratefully leaving the Bridge.

After the turbolift left, Kirk turned round and faced the Communications Officer. "Uhura - well done. I couldn't have thought of a better idea myself."

"Thank you, Captain." Uhura had to admit it, she was feeling quite pleased with herself; but would Karon come?

From the approving grins on Sulu's and Chekov's faces, it was apparent the Captain wasn't the only one who thought it a good idea. Well, thought Uhura, if between the lot of them they couldn't get Karon to unfreeze a little, they might as well all give up.

Several hours later, Karon found himself in the corridor leading to the Officer's Lounge, wondering how he could have considered coming here. They couldn't really want him there, surely? It would only spoil their party. Yet it had really seemed as if Lt. Uhura did want him to come. He had been sitting in his cabin, remembering times, odd occasions at the Academy when people had made tentative offers of friendship; then, he had thought they were either prying or laughing at him. But with his new hindsight, acquired since his talk with the First Officer, he could see that it hadn't always been the other person who had been at fault.

Perhaps he ought to take his courage in both hands and go to the Officer's Lounge. Courage in battle had never been lacking in Karon, one of the things he had inherited from his Klingon genes, but courage where personal relationships were concerned? Telling himself firmly that not to go to the party would be another kind of cowardice, Karon began walking.

On the threshold he almost turned away again, but just at that moment the Navigator appeared from behind, carrying a bottle of what looked like Earth

whisky. One of the very few Human inventions Klingons thought held any worth at all. But Karon wasn't concerned about the whisky, only about the reactions of the Navigator.

He needn't have worried.

"Hello, Karon. Glad you could make it. We thought perhaps you wouldn't come, and they'll all be pleased you have. Come on in - the others are already there."

Chekov's friendly greeting did much to dispel Karon's apprehensions, and when he followed the Russian into the Lounge, he was surprised to experience only a momentary sensation of stomach-churning. Knowing that another Klingon would curse him for a cowardly fool, and knowing in that instant that a real Klingon would never feel like he did anyway, Karon walked forward and took a vacant seat between the Helmsman and a blonde Human woman wearing a medical uniform.

The realisation that for once he was acting totally like a Human gave him some comfort, at least. Not that it cured his nervousness.

The small gathering did turn into a real party, as Uhura had planned, with all of them making the greatest effort possible to make Karon feel at home. The Klingon/Human didn't really say much; Uhura suspected he was really terribly shy when it came to making friends. But the rest of them talked and acted and enjoyed themselves exactly the same as usual, as if sensing that a refusal to accept him as he was and expect him to join in as a Human would make him crawl back into his shell again. None of them underestimated the effort it had taken the hybrid to come at all.

Karon was, however, enjoying himself whether he showed it or not. It was the first time he could remember that he had been at a social gathering without feeling either out of place or unwanted. He did exchange a few words of conversation with the woman on his left, who turned out to be called Christine, and through the course of the evening spoke a little to the others. But for the most part he was content to sit and say nothing, listening instead to the good-natured conversation, grateful that they seemed to be treating him no differently from any other crewmember. They told many stories about life on the Enterprise, anecdotes of adventures they had all been involved in, some humerous, the majority downright dangerous. Karon had also heard of the Starship from the Klingon viewpoint; not long before his escape from Klingon had come the first few of James Kirk's skirmishes with the Imperial Klingon Navy.

To hear it all at second hand was one thing; to hear it all from these people, who had lived through the adventures told now around the galaxy as legend, was quite another. Karon couldn't help but begin to like them all, and to feel more than a little humble that he was actually here, on the ship where it had all happened, amazingly being accepted as part of her crew.

There were still many difficulties to overcome; he was realistic enough to know he would be facing them all his life. There was the matter of the practical joker in Engineering for a start.

There would still be times, he knew, when his Klingon nature came to the forefront and he would hate himself; but a start had been made, finally, towards acceptance.

When he left the Officer's Lounge later on that evening to make his way back to his cabin, Karon felt a good deal more hopeful than he had done for many years.

Behind him in the Officer's Lounge the party was still going on.

"What do you think of him, Christine?" asked a thoughtful Uhura.

Chapel considered a moment before speaking. "He doesn't say much, but I think he's okay. Probably lonely. I wasn't on duty when Leonard gave him his

standard physical, but I got the impression he was a little worried about him. I think tonight has helped."

"I think so too," Sulu joined in. "I think he enjoyed himself, even if he didn't say much. We'll just have to keep trying."

"The Captain seems to think he's worth it," Chekov added. "That's good enough for me."

When Karon awoke next morning and left his cabin to go on duty, he found that the Enterprise was now in a parking orbit around Deep Space Station K10. Apparently shore leave was in order, and when he checked the list, the Klingon/Human was surprised to discover that his name was on it; he didn't have to report for duty that morning at all.

But he wasn't really due for leave. He was grateful for it, certainly, yet he couldn't help feeling that the Engineer and the Captain were conspiring to keep him out of Engineering for as long as possible. He couldn't make up his mind for whose sake they were doing it.

Feeling strangely let-down for someone going on shore leave, Karon waited only to return to his cabin for some credits, then made his way rather half-heartedly to the transporter room.

As he neared it, a sudden idea struck him. According to the list, both Chekov and Sulu were also on the same leave rota as he was; they would probably already have beamed across to K10. If he could find them, perhaps they would allow him to spend his shore leave in their company; they had acted friendly enough towards him at the party, and they were the kind of people he would want as friends, if it ever became possible for him to have a friend of any kind. Once more he remembered Kolin; no, there was no other Klingon/Human hybrid in the galaxy except himself, so where was he ever going to find a real friend again?

Still, Mr. Spock had made friends, hasn't he? So perhaps there was some small hope for him after all. He didn't really believe it, but he had to try to convince himself; to live without hope. however small, was not to live at all; not as living should be.

Feeling only slightly more cheerful, Karon joined the others waiting in the transporter room and took his turn to beam over to the Space Station.

Once on K10, however, instead of remaining with the other Enterprise crew-members, Karon separated himself and went off in search of Chekov and Sulu.

He had a good look round the area where the traders came to sell their wares; at the various entertainments the Space Station had to offer; K10 was larger than some of the Deep Space Stations, and its shore leave facilities were comprehensive. Unfortunately, the size of the Space Station didn't aid his search, and eventually, after two hours, he found himself sitting in one of K10's bars, still on his own and still miserable.

He sat and nursed a drink of some fiery green liquid whose origin the bar-tender didn't seem entirely certain of, or, more likely, he didn't want to say. Karon, in his present mood, didn't particularly care, so long as it possessed the desired degree of potency.

The bar was far from empty, though there were no other Enterprise or Star-fleet personnel present at that moment; there was a group of men and women wearing combat uniforms in one corner; part of a group protecting trading vessels near the border; K10 was nearer Klingon territory than Karon had been for a good while. Their ship was also in parking orbit, and Karon silently wished them well. The life expectancy in those freelance organisations wasn't very high at all. Still, they seemed to be enjoying themselves, which was more than he was.

There were various alien types sitting drinking quietly; some alone, some

in twos or threes; K10 was certainly a meeting place for many different races, situated as it was on one of the main routes through this particular quadrant.

By the bar sat two traders; one male and one female. They appeared to have a wide variety of merchandise with them in containers of varying size and shape, but didn't seem to be trying to sell anything; all they were interested in at that moment was the same occupation as that of everyone in the bar; having a quiet drink.

Karon sat and drank his drink and considered what to do next. He didn't really know either Chekov or Sulu well enough to guess easily which particular recreational facility they would have been likely to head for. But at that particular moment he badly wanted company, and there was no-one else he could think of who would be even remotely likely to tolerate his presence. Karon was feeling very sorry for himself indeed. The good resolutions he had been trying so hard to keep up since his talk with Spock were in grave danger. Feeling very grumpy and distinctly unsociable, Karon went to the bar and ordered another drink. A double.

He had not long returned to his seat when an ill-assorted, noisy bunch of space travellers elbowed their way into the bar; there were a few Orions, a couple of Andorians, including a female, several nondescript humanoid types including three more females, and a particularly nasty-looking humanoid with slightly reptilian features whom Karon assumed to be a Vegan. Karon hadn't actually seen one before, but his presence in the group led Karon to believe that none of the other humanoids in the group were of Terran origin; the Vegans had never been able to forgive the people of Earth for their part in the overthrow of the Vegan Tyranny. They hated Humans worse than Klingons did.

The bartender, however, was of Terran origin, and the Vegan, who appeared to be the group's leader, apparently knew it. He didn't actually insult the man - at least, not much - but he gave the distinct impression he would like to, given half the chance.

Others of the rather ragged-looking group seemed to have met the traders before; but the traders clearly didn't want to have anything more to do with them than was absolutely necessary.

Karon fell to wondering just who and what they were; bandits? smugglers? Certainly nothing admirable. They all looked very nasty pieces of work indeed, and not particularly clean either. Still, so long as they left him alone, who was he to worry? On these Deep Space Stations you were likely to run into practically everybody.

For several minutes, they did, in fact, leave everyone alone more or less, and contented themselves with loud conversation, plenty of ribald laughter, and the odd bawdy song. When Karon got up and went to the other end of the bar for yet another drink, this time a treble, they hardly looked at him at all, except for the female Andorian who looked at him in a way he didn't much like at all, nor the smile that went with it. Karon, however, didn't smile back, but returned to his seat as quickly as possible with his drink.

After a while it became clear that the more alcohol the group consumed, the more they were likely to look for trouble. The talk got louder, the laughter wilder, and several chairs and tables were overturned as a result of one of the Orions attempting to dance on them and, not surprisingly, losing his balance quite spectacularly.

The border patrol crowd left; not because they were bothered by the Vegan's lot, but because they had something better to do. Several of the aliens whose races Karon couldn't recognise left quietly, not wanting any trouble and seeing that if they remained there much longer they would be likely to see some.

Karon, by that time, was too drunk to really notice.

In fact, for at least twenty minutes he sat there, staring into his empty glass, thinking only of his own misery, of his loneliness and dissatisfaction

with himself. For several minutes he didn't notice that apart from the bartender, the two traders and the rowdy troublemaking types, he was the only one left in the bar. He also didn't hear when the jokes and pointed remarks began to be aimed in his direction.

"It ain't right that anyone in uniform should be allowed into a decent bar!" Another one of the Orions had begun to talk loudly in bad English.

"Nah - how can you enjoy yourself when one of those Federation creeps is about? They shouldn't let 'em on a self-respecting Space Station where ordinary people are trying to have fun. How can anyone be expected to enjoy himself with one of those killjoys around?" One of the humanoids came across and drunkenly perched himself on the table next to Karon's. He clearly expected an answer, but didn't get one. Karon merely glared at him. He was in no mood to humour anyone, no matter how outnumbered he was. It wasn't his style, anyhow.

But the glare seemed to be having some sort of effect on the humanoid. He stopped swaying and peered at Karon closely.

"Hey, Krenga," he shouted to the Vegan. "Come over here - there's something real funny about this one!"

Krenga put down his drink and stumped haughtily over. He halted three feet in front of Karon and stared evilly at the Enterprise crewman. Karon returned his stare coldly.

"You're right, Wern. There is something funny about this one. Something about the eyes. And the skin's wrong. But there's some Human in him. I'm never wrong about that." The Vegan spat out the word as if it hurt. The others laughed viciously. It was time they had some fun.

"Answer me, Federation worm. What are you? We like to identify our victims first, you know. We are not uncivilised." Krenga folded his arms across his huge stomach and waited. He wanted to scare this red-uniformed Starfleet creature with Human in him. Scare him and then hurt him. He deserved some enjoyment. And there was no doubt that any being with even a slight relationship to a Human deserved everything he got.

Finally, Karon did answer. The irony of being insulted for his Human blood instead of his Klingon ancestry was not lost on him, especially when the Vegan's remarks had made him feel anything but Human.

"I am Lt. Karon, of the U.S.S. Enterprise's Engineering Department." Karon's voice was icy, daring Krenga to say anything more. "The Starship is in parking orbit around K10, Vegan, and I warn you - any trouble you cause will land you in deep water with the Federation. I also warn you that I need no help here; do not annoy me more than you have already."

"Ha! He doesn't sound much like a Human, does he?" Krenga appealed to his comrades. "And what sort of name a Karon for a Human?"

"I warn you again, Vegan. Be quiet." If looks could kill, Karon's glare would have withered Krenga on the spot. The thought crossed his mind that Captain Kirk wouldn't be too pleased if he started a brawl; but then again, he could hardly be accused of starting it. And the Vegan and his cronies had caught Karon at a bad time; suddenly he realised he wanted the Vegan to taunt him again, to give him an excuse. He was Klingon again and he didn't care.

"There is something funny about him, Krenga." The humanoid called Wern was peering at him suspiciously again. "Something I don't like much." The rest of the group was by now standing around the Klingon/Human, regarding him as if he were an unpleasant lab specimen. Karon recognised the feeling.

"If you don't like me you don't have to look, fool." Karon's voice had acquired an edge. His temper was running out fast.

"Don't call me a fool!" the humanoid hissed, bending down to hiss the words in the Klingon/Human's face. "And don't think your precious Starship can help you. There's no other Federation worms on this side of K10, so don't think to

escape your punishment, Earther!"

Somewhere in him he wanted to laugh at the humanoid's choice of the favourite Klingon insult. But he was past laughing now. He didn't care if he was alone or not.

"I am not surprised," Krenga began evilly, "that you serve aboard the Enterprise. That ship is known for the peculiar mixtures among its officers. I have not yet decided what mixture you are, but I will find out."

At the implied insult to the Vulcan, Karon leaped to his feet with a snarl, and would have seized the Vegan by the neck if the Orions hadn't restrained his arms.

But Krenga did nothing but grin; it was the reaction he had wanted. If they were to have some fun, he didn't want to be blamed afterwards; he didn't underestimate the powers of the legendary James T. Kirk to find and discipline him, no matter what his boasts had been, but - if the Federation worm started the fight himself? The Human wouldn't be able to say a thing.

But he did seem to have found Karon's Achilles heel.

"So - what mixture are you? Your skin is wrong, and so are you. But I have an idea. Wern - bring me that green bag!"

Wern obeyed the snarled order and went back to the bar. He took a largish green bag from the stupefied traders, who made not the slightest attempt to recover their wares. Wern brought the bag back to the Vegan, who snatched it from him without as much as a thank you. Krenga pushed the green bag into Karon's face.

The bag - or rather, it's contents - began to hiss.

Karon threw the restraining Orion arms off him and drew back. He knew what was in the sack, and now everyone knew what he was. He was just glad the furry creatures were in a sack.

"So. Klingon!" Krenga hissed louder than the sack. "You defile the name! Klingons have honour, at least; they are not afraid of a good battle. But to be mixed with a Human? You are an abomination!"

The Vegan's voice had risen almost to screaming pitch, which rapidly changed to a loud gasp of pain as Karon leaped forward and punched him soundly on the nose. The huge Vegan staggered backwards and somehow fell, dazed, onto a chair instead of the floor.

The Orions and Wern jumped on the Klingon/Human from behind, attempting to knock his head against the ground. But Karon was just too strong for them and too well-trained in the art of warfare. He wasn't particularly proud of the fact, but it was useful. He threw the three attackers off and leaped back to his feet, sending Wern flying over a table with a well-placed kick.

Then the rest of the party joined in. The bartender and the two traders hid behind the bar, the bartender hiding as many bottles and glasses as he could. In the middle of the floor, the green sack was still hissing hysterically.

The fight developed into a real old-fashioned bar-r oom brawl, with up-to-date dirty tactics employed. Tables rolled and glasses crashed as the fight went backwards and forwards. Karon was giving them a good run for their money.

But there were just too many of them and only one of him, no matter how good an account he gave of himself, and he was handicapped by the amount he had had to drink.

Eventually, Karon lay unconscious on the floor, with the bruised and angry Krenga and company standing over him.

"Shall we kill him, Krenga?" one of the Orions asked pleadingly, licking his lips.

"Yes, Krenga!" cried Wern. "He has hurt me. Let us kill him. Slowly."

"I will do it, Krenga, if you wish," said one of the females. "You know how good I am at it."

But Krenga rubbed his hairy chin thoughtfully. "No. Perhaps not."

"What? Why not?" Krenga's decision was greeted with cried of dismay and thoughts of mutiny.

"Because we may be able to use him, fools," the Vegan grinned viciously. "This is no ordinary Starfleet underling; he is an officer, and probably one of a kind as his species goes. He would be valuable scientifically, even if I did not know that the Captain of the Enterprise is a softhearted fool He makes the mistake of caring about his underlings. Captain James Kirk will have to pay for that failing. Financially."

The allocated shore leave time for the first parties from the Enterprise was over, and all crewmembers had returned to the ship. With one exception.

James Kirk learned of the exception very shortly afterwards and was not exactly pleased. He, Spock and McCoy had all been due to beam over to K10 themselves in a few minutes, and now he supposed at least part of their precious shore leave was going to have to be spent looking for Karon. He was not at all pleased.

He collected McCoy from Sickbay, and they both went off in search of the Vulcan. Though Spock was far more inclined to go on shore leave with them these days than he used to be, it had still taken a little persuasion from them to get him to agree to leave the research he said he had to do and go with them, and McCoy was also not pleased when he heard Kirk's news. Apart from anything else, he wasn't too keen on his own precious R & R being interrupted.

"Where has that mixed-up idiot got to now?" McCoy exclaimed loudly as he and Kirk made their way towards Spock's cabin. "Doesn't he know the trouble he's going to get himself into? After all you've done to try and help him?"

"Sssh, Bones," Kirk pleaded. "Like you said, I went to quite a bit of trouble to get that business in Engineering sorted out, and the last thing I want now is for news of Karon's disappearance to get all over the ship. There is a limit to what I can do for him, and I can't keep on letting him off so lightly when he does these things, especially if everyone else knows what's been going on."

"Yes, Jim - I understand," replied McCoy more quietly, though not much. "But it still makes me damned mad to think that the first thing he does when he goes on R & R - leave which he shouldn't have had yet anyway - is to go missing. I hope you're going to be hard on him when he gets back, Jim. What that man needs is some good old-fashioned discipline!"

"Right, Bones," replied Kirk, who couldn't help smiling at McCoy's earnestness, "When we get him back I'll hand him straight over to you."

They arrived at Spock's cabin just as the Vulcan was coming out of the door. How did Spock always seem to know just when they were coming?

Kirk had never been entirely sure, but at that moment he was too concerned about the matter of Karon to think about it.

"Captain, Doctor." The First Officer nodded a greeting to them both as he fell into step beside them on their way to the Transporter Room. "Is anything wrong?"

"Is it that obvious, Spock?" Kirk grinned. Trust Spock to guess. "But it's nothing too serious - at least I hope not. It's just another problem our tame Klingon's given us."

"Indeed, Captain?" Spock looked mildly surprised, for him. He had really thought Karon had meant to make an effort. "What difficulty has Mr. Karon

become involved in now?"

"No 'difficulty', Mr. Spock," McCoy drawled. "He just forgot to come back off leave."

"Really?" Now Spock did look serious. "I confess to being taken at something of a disadvantage by your news, gentlemen. As you know, I have talked with Mr. Karon at greater length than either of you, and he did not impress me as being the kind of person to wilfully flout Starfleet discipline."

"Oh, come on, Spock - how can you know?" McCoy was openly sceptical. "Just because you had a little heart-to-heart with him, you can't think you understand him that much. He doesn't think like a Human, after all."

"Really, Doctor." Spock gave McCoy one of his best disapproving looks. "If Mr. Karon thought like a Human, then most probably I should not claim to understand him. But he does not, and neither do I. I did not say, however, that I understood him, only that I did not believe him to be the kind of person who would deliberately overstay his leave."

"Spock - I don't believe you can really be serious about this." McCoy wasn't giving up once he had got his teeth into something. "How can you say you don't think he'd deliberately flout discipline after that little episode in Engineering? And anyway, I didn't say he'd deliberately do anything, did I? I only meant that he's probably gone off and got drunk somewhere, probably because of that business, and just hasn't been in a fit state to realise he ought to be back. It happens, after all. Dammit, it's always happening. And it's never that serious."

"Perhaps not, Doctor, and I hope for Mr. Karon's sake that you are correct." Spock wasn't convinced. "But he is not an ordinary crewmember. He is half Klingon, and believes in discipline. He regretted deeply losing his temper in Engineering and expected to be punished. When he received nothing more than a serious warning he was extremely grateful, and determined to do better in future. He is aware as much as anyone else that the Enterprise is really his last chance of active Starship duty, and is determined to do nothing to jeopardise that chance, if he can help it. The fracas in Engineering was, after all, not entirely his fault, and Mr. Scott has some disciplining of his own to do. No, Karon believes in discipline, and would not wilfully overstay his leave. I am certain something must have happened to detain him."

"Aren't you being a little pessimistic, Spock?" McCoy wasn't entirely convinced by the Vulcan's arguments either, but he was a little less sure than he had been.

But Kirk was rubbing his chin thoughtfully as they entered the Transporter Room.

"I don't know yet what the truth of it is," he said as they stepped up to the platform, "but I'm beginning to get worried. If we can't find Karon ourselves then I'm going to order a search. I didn't want to, because an official search really will mean deep trouble for him. But after what you've just said, Spock, I don't mean to leave it too long if we can't find him."

They rematerialised on K10 and began to search in earnest. Apart from wanting to find Karon for the Klingon/Human's sake, they also wanted to find him so they could start their R & R.

Enterprise personnel were in most of the bars and shops immediately surrounding the beam-down point. Kirk asked them casually if they had seen Karon anywhere, but no-one had. After they had searched for quite a while without success, Kirk began to think he would have to return to the ship and instigate that search. It shouldn't prove too difficult; there were no other Klingons on K10 at that moment, so the sensors shouldn't have too much trouble in picking up Karon's unique readings. Maybe he ought to call Chekov and get him to do it; he was back from leave and could be trusted to be discreet. That way it wouldn't be

all over the ship that the Klingon/Human had overstayed his leave, and it would leave the three of them to get on with theirs.

Thought of Chekov gave him an idea; hadn't Chekov, Sulu and Uhura asked Karon to that party last night? Maybe they had seen him when they were down on K10. Why hadn't it occurred to him before?

"Hang on a minute." Kirk stopped Spock and McCoy as the three of them walked down a corridor. "I want to call the ship."

The other two halted and looked at him non-commitally, wondering if this was the moment when Kirk was going to have K10 swarming with Security personnel.

Kirk flipped his communicator open. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Scott here, Captain." The Engineer's voice came over clearly.

"Ah, Mr. Scott. I have a job for Mr. Chekov."

"Yes, Captain?"

"Have him run a sensor sweep of K10 for Klingon/Human hybrid life form readings. And ask him if he, Sulu or Uhura happened to see Lt. Karon when they were down here."

"Aye, Captain." There was a slight pause while Scotty gave Chekov an order and asked the relevant questions. "Captain," the Engineer's voice came back, "Chekov's beginning the sweep, but none of them saw Karon on K10. Apparently none of them realised he was on leave at the same time or they might have searched him out. Anything wrong, Captain?"

"No, Scotty - nothing serious. Just contact me when Chekov locates him, would you? Kirk out."

He put the communicator away and frowned; he had tried to be as casual as possible, but Scotty and the others could tell when something was wrong a parsec away. At least it was only the Bridge crew he had talked to; he could rely on their discretion for as long as it took to find the missing lieutenant.

"A sensor sweep is the logical procedure to take, Captain," Spock commented thoughtfully. "However, it will now be impossible to ignore officially Mr. Karon's overstayed leave."

"I know, Spock," Kirk replied as they continued on their way down the corridor, "but I have no choice; we're getting nowhere on our own. And besides, you didn't think I'd let him off scot free, did you?" Mentally, he added, if nothing's happened to him and he's just deliberately vanished, that is. But he didn't say that aloud. None of them had mentioned it, but as the time went on and the three of them hadn't been able to turn up the slightest sign of the Klingon/Human's presence on K10, they were all becoming concerned.

Kirk had planned to leave Chekov to get on with the search, while the three of them went off to follow their own pursuits, but the niggling worry that Karon hadn't disappeared of his own accord wouldn't have let him enjoy himself properly anyway. Spock and McCoy made no mention of calling off their own private search either, so they continued on their tour of practically every entertainment complex and facility that K10 possessed, still without turning up the slightest sign of Karon's ever having been there.

Eventually they found themselves on the far side of the Space Station to the point where they had beamed down. Large as K10 was, there wasn't really a great deal of it left to search, and there had been no calls from the ship to say that Chekov had come up with any answers.

Feeling distinctly annoyed with the Klingon/Human for causing all this trouble, Kirk entered yet another bar with the Vulcan and the Doctor in tow. If they had had a drink in every bar they had been in, none of them would have been able to stand up by now.

But immediately they set foot in this one, Kirk's intuition was ringing bells in his mind. There wasn't a great deal in the bar to suggest it; but two broken chairs and a table leaning at a peculiar angle, not to mention the unusual lack of custom, was enough to tell him that a fight had taken place there in the not too distant past.

McCoy's expression and Spock's eyebrows told him that they were thinking along much the same lines.

The three of them walked up to the bar and sat on three stools. Bartenders in these deep space stations were notoriously close about what went on in their establishments; with the characters that circumstances made them serve for the vast majority of their working hours, an ability not to notice certain things that went on was virtually a prerequisite for the job. So pushing for information by a Starship Captain and two officers was likely to meet great res. istance if not done very skilfully indeed. And Kirk could hardly have him hauled off to the Enterprise and thrown in the brig if he wouldn't co-operate. Starfleet's Public Relations people wouldn't like that very much at all.

No, they would have to be very careful indeed.

Kirk ordered three drinks. The bartender set them in front of them, and they all, including Spock, began to sip them. His manner as he served them didn't seem to suggest that he was in a mood for pleasant conversation.

"Quiet, aren't you?" Kirk remarked pleasantly.

"What if I am?" the bartender snapped. Kirk had obviously chosen the wrong line to start off with.

"Only making conversation." The Captain of the Enterprise forced himself to smile.

"When you've had the kind of day I have, conversation is the last thing you'd want!"

"You've had a bad day?" McCoy put in sympathetically. There were times when a good bedside manner could be downright useful.

The man behind the bar wasn't above having a good grumble, as secretive as his employment might require him to be.

"A bad day? You might call it that. You wouldn't believe some of the abuse I have to put up with!"

"I thought perhaps you'd had some trouble; the chairs, you know," Kirk added pleasantly.

The bartender shot him a suspicious look. "What'd you know about it?"

"Why - nothing," Kirk said innocently. "Except that I know how - em - exuberant people can get when they've been cooped up on a ship for a long while. I hope none of my men were involved."

"Why would you think that?" If the irritable man had been suspicious before, he was almost on the point of clamming up permamently now. He did not like prying from Officialdom. Especially from Starship Captains; you never knew what trouble you might find yourself in!

"Perhaps the matter of the compensation, Captain," Spock put in helpfully. The bartender's ears pricked up almost noticeably; Spock, as usual, had weighed up a stranger's character accurately.

"Compensation?" Suddenly the bartender was interested.

"Oh - yes." Kirk took the cue from Spock. "It's sometimes necessary when Starship personnel get a little over-enthusiastic on R & R to compensate certain parties for any damage caused."

"In credits?"

"Naturally."

"Well," said the bartender, suddenly conspiratorial, leaning forward. "Actually, one of your men was in the fight."

"Was he?" Kirk asked, carefully neutral.

"Yes." The bartender looked around before continuing, as if he expected some prying eye or ear to be spying on him. "He was here a while. Came in alone and just sat there. He got pretty drunk, I can tell you. Think he was an engineer of some kind; wearing the uniform, anyway. But there was something strange about him."

"Go on," Kirk urged quietly, his ears having pricked up more than the bartender's had when compensation had been mentioned.

"Well, like I said, he sat there for a while, not talking to anyone, and then Krenga and his lot came in."

"Krenga?" Kirk, Spock and McCoy looked at each other. Apparently they were supposed to know who Krenga was. Unfortunately, they didn't.

"Don't tell me you've never heard of him!" The bartender rolled his eyes to the ceiling, wondering how such ignorance could be possible in Starship officers.

"No, we haven't," said Kirk in his best apologetic manner. "Perhaps you could enlighten us."

"Krenga," said the man fiercely, leaning forward and practically glaring at Kirk, "is the meanest, nastiest, crookedest bandit this side of Aldebaran. He's a Vegan, which says enough about him to start with; hates Humans, and practically everyone else come to that. He and his crowd cause more trouble in these parts than half the Klingons we get in here. Which brings me to your man."

"I beg your pardon?" Kirk tried not to look surprised. Karon was certainly more swarthy than the average Terran, and if you knew his ancestry it wasn't hard to see where his looks came from; but he wore no beard, and if you didn't know, it would be difficult to put your finger on the fact that he was half Klingon. At least, Kirk had thought it would have been difficult.

"Oh, don't come the innocent with me. Or maybe you don't know?" The man behind the bar grinned somewhat maliciously. "Nah - you must do. Starfleet might be interfering busibodies at times, but they aren't fools. No - your man has Klingon in him all right; Krenga proved it. He didn't like that, Krenga didn't. Mixing good Klingon blood with Terran muck, that's what he said, but then he would. Personally, I wish Krenga and his kind would vanish permanently; they're bad for business."

"How did this Vegan find out, and where have they taken him?" Kirk's patience was wearing a little thin; things were beginning to look rather bad for Karon, and the way the bartender kept jumping from one point to the other, for best dramatic effect, no doubt, didn't exactly tell Kirk what he needed to know. The Captain was almost ready to grab the man and shake him.

"Perhaps if you began at the beginning?" Spock said helpfully. The man looked at him, then at the Captain. He decided he'd better co-operate.

"Well, it's like this, see; your man was sitting in here, nursing his drink, when Krenga and his lot came in. They were the same as usual; noisy, drunk and a damn nuisance. By the time they'd been in here a few minutes nearly everyone else had left. Except for your lieutenant and a couple of trader friends of mine. Anyway, Krenga and his bunch soon got fed up of insultin' each other, so they decided to insult your man instead. They went and stood round him, and called him a few names, but he didn't take much notice, to be fair to him. Well, then Krenga got the idea there was somethin' funny about him; not many people would have, but Krenga's like that. So the Vegan yells for one of his cronies to bring a green sack the traders had with them. Turns

out it had a bunch of those little furry creatures who hate Klingons in it. I'd never have let them in here if I'd known what was in that sack! I heard about the trouble they had on K7!"

Spock's expression altered not one bit. Kirk put his head in his hands and groaned. McCoy had to suppress a terrible urge to laugh hysterically. Kirk looked up and glared at the man, wondering if he knew that the Enterprise had been involved in that little fiasco.

"Go on," commanded the Captain, not in his friendliest tone.

"Well, when the things started screamin', they knew he was part Klingon, and called him a few worse things. In the end he just lost his temper and laid into 'em. It was quite a fight, I can tell you. He managed to hurt a few of 'em before they knocked him out. My bar was in a right old state, took me ages to straighten it out. They were all for killing him right there and then, some of 'em, but Krenga wouldn't let them. Seems he had an idea to make some money out of him. Trust that Krenga. So they dragged him off, green sack of tribbles and all. That's all I know. Now, what about my compensation?"

Kirk stood up and turned for the door, McCoy and Spock at his heels.

"Hey, what about my compensation?" the bartender yelled furiously after them.

"Put it in writing!" Kirk threw back as they went out the door.

Back in the bar, the bartender threw a bar-cloth down in a fury. It knocked over a decanter perched precariously on the edge and spilt some of his best brandy.

Out in the corridor, Kirk pulled out his communicator to call the ship. Even as he was about to flip it open, it beeped.

"Enterprise to Captain Kirk."

"Kirk here, Scotty. Go ahead."

"Chekov's just finished running that sweep, Captain. There's no Klingon/Human hybrid readings anywhere on K10. And we've just had a verra odd demand from a character calling himself Krenga. Nasty piece of work, he sounds."

"I think I already know something about that, Scotty." Kirk almost groaned again. "We're coming back to the ship. Three to beam up. Kirk out."

Back on the Bridge, Kirk had Uhura put the recorded transmission of Krenga's demands on the viewscreen. As the image of the Vegan came on, he had to agree with Scotty's assessment; Krenga looked a very nasty piece of work indeed.

"Captain Kirk," the image of the Vegan said in a haughty tone, denoting what he thought of Starship captains, "there is some business we must discuss. About a certain lieutenant of yours. That's right, Captain - Lt. Karon. A peculiar specimen if ever I saw one. Well, we've got him. Not on the ship here, but in a safe place. So don't think you can find him by attacking us. That wouldn't do you or him any good at all. He's not in a particularly good shape to start with, and I assure you, if you disable my ship or my crew, especially myself, in any way, you will not find him until it is too late to help him.

"What I am demanding is a ransom, Captain. I want enough credits to buy a better ship for myself, plus a few thousand extra - my crew do feel they deserve it. When you have decided to pay, contact me. Only do not leave it too long; your lieutenant might not survive for any great length of time. So do, please, be decisive. Adieu, Captain Kirk."

With a nonchalant wave of his hand the Vegan faded from the screen. The

evil grin and the gloating manner were making Kirk feel a little hot under the collar. Beside him, he could see from McCoy's expression that the good doctor felt exactly the same. Scotty looked downright furious at such treatment of one of his best engineers, and Spock was completely expressionless.

Things did not look good for Karon.

"No sign of him on board that ship, Spock?" Kirk gestured towards Krenga's battered-looking ship which was now on the viewscreen.

"No, Captain," replied the Vulcan from the library computer station. "The sensors indicate Mr. Karon is not on board."

"Captain," Scotty broke in, "when you were down on K10, not long after you beamed down, in fact - yon old ship warped out of orbit pretty fast. I didna' think much of it at the time, not even when they came back just as suddenly a while later. But it looks mighty suspicious now."

"So they've taken Karon off and hidden him somewhere, have they?" Kirk frowned; they were a little further on in their search, he supposed, but not much. It was a big universe.

"Any idea exactly how long they were gone, Scotty?"

The Engineer looked thoughtful. "It'll be recorded, Captain, and I dinna suppose they can have gone verra far in that ship. I'd be surprised if she can give them more than warp two, if that."

"You're probably right, Scotty. She is a bit of a rust-bucket." Kirk regarded the rather tatty-looking spacecraft hanging on the black field. "But it doesn't cut down the search area very much, and I have no doubt that Krenga meant every word he said about the shape Karon was in when they left him. But where did they leave him? Any chance of tracking accurately where that ship went to?" Kirk looked at the Vulcan.

Spock looked up from his scrutiny of the library computer viewer.

"I have been attempting to ascertain that degree of accuracy, Captain. According to the data concerning the time the Vegan's ship left orbit, the time it was away, the trajectory at which it left orbit, and speculations as to the ship's capabilities, it is possible to calculate the sector to which it travelled. It does, however, as you pointed out, still leave a very large area to search."

"And we don't know how long Karon's got, or why his time is so limited." Kirk shrugged helplessly, then made a decision. "Unless it's because he's badly injured and won't last if he doesn't get medical attention. That Krenga is not going to get away with such treatment of a member of my crew. He surely must realise what Starfleet regulations have to say about the paying of ransoms? Well, I'm through waiting. We'll contact Krenga and demand Karon's safe return. If he doesn't like it then he really is going to need a new ship!"

"What about Karon, Jim?" McCoy asked worriedly. "You heard what that Vegan said would happen to him if you attacked their ship."

"I must point out, Dr. McCoy," Spock put in, "that Mr. Karon may already be dead."

"I'd rather you didn't point it out, thank you, Spock!"

"But, Doctor, I was merely trying to explain that the Captain's plan is the most logical to follow. Karon is not on board Krenga's ship, and if he is still alive, the best way we can help him is by finding out where he is. Paying a ransom, which is out of the question, would not ensure that Krenga or any of his men would tell the truth. The best course of action would be to capture someone, preferably Krenga himself, and extract the truth from him."

"I'm glad you think my plan is the most logical, Spock," Kirk said as he stood up, "but we still have to think about the best way to go about the assault. If at all possible, I want to avoid anyone, even Krenga, getting hurt. Starships

can't just go about attacking ships, even if they do belong to a bandit like the Vegan, especially in this quadrant; we don't want to give the Klingons any propoganda to use against us. I want to see all Heads of Department in the Briefing Room in ten minutes. With some ideas."

Montgomery Scott was already in the Briefing Room when Kirk and Spock walked through the door. The look on his face told Kirk that the Engineer had come up with an idea. But he had to wait until all the others arrived before he could speak out. The necessary use of patience was almost killing him.

"Yes, Mr. Scott," Kirk said when the rest had come in and sat down, all of sixty seconds later. Kirk's Heads of Department were nothing if not punctual.

"Mr. Spock said we should capture Krenga, and I know how we can do it without firing a single shot, Captain." Scotty looked tremendously pleased with himself.

"You mean to transport him aboard the Enterprise without warning, Mr. Scott?" Apparently the same idea had occurred to Spock. The Chief Engineer suddenly felt very deflated.

"Aye, Mr. Spock, I did mean that," Scotty replied good-naturedly, despite the stealing of his thunder. "Yon ship's so old and so badly maintained - she can't have had a decent Engineer on board her for years - that her shields aren't working properly. I dinna think Krenga knows it. I dinna think the Vegan's crowd know what they're doing at all. It surprises me they even know how to fly her!"

"So we can beam Krenga aboard?"

"Aye, Captain."

"Good. Now we're getting somewhere." Kirk looked suddenly more hopeful. "Spock, you didn't tell me you'd thought of that possibility."

"No, Captain, I did not," Spock replied haughtily. "I assumed that Mr. Scott would check that possibility first of all, which he did. I have occupied my time in attempting to ascertain which area the Vegan's ship visited in its absence. There may still be some random factor which prevents us from obtaining the necessary information verbally."

Kirk almost laughed - Spock thought he was implying that he hadn't thought of it and was feeling miffed. But somehow Kirk felt better about the whole thing; difficulties apart, he began to feel that they would, after all, get Karon back.

"Come on, gentlemen; to the Bridge. We have a guest to prepare for!"

Back on the Bridge, Kirk waited for word from the Transporter Room that everything was ready. It had taken a short while to recall and beam up all the Enterprise personnel still on K10, but not too long. Kirk's crew was a good bunch, even if they did grumble at being brought back before their R & R was due to end. Kirk hoped that the Vegan's ship's sensors weren't powerful enough to detect all the transporter activity, or that they just wouldn't notice. He was beginning to get the impression that Krenga and his friends weren't particularly bright.

The intercom bleeped. "Transporter Room to Captain Kirk. All ready here, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Scott. Mr. Spock will give you the co-ordinates." Kirk nodded to Spock at his Science station, where he was monitoring the Vegan's life-form readings. At Kirk's nod he fed them through to the Transporter Room.

"Co-ordinates received, Captain." Scotty's voice sounded positively enthusiastic. At his console, Chekov gathered his concentration; there was no

telling what the Vegan's shipmates might do when he suddenly disappeared from am among them. The Captain didn't want any fighting, but there might be no choice. And if there wasn't, Chekov would be ready.

"Security there, Scotty?" Kirk had to make sure.

"Aye, sir. Ready and waiting to take yon Krenga character to Sickbay the moment he arrives. I believe Dr. McCoy has a potent dose of truth drug waiting, Captain."

"Very well, Mr. Scott." He was just about to give the order to energise when he was interrupted by Uhura.

"Captain - there's a transmission coming through."

Kirk thought for a second. "Put it on screen, Uhura. But this doesn't change anything - we go ahead with our plan. Transporter Room, stand by!"

The viewscreen filled with the image of the unpleasant Vegan as Uhura put the transmission on visual. He was looking unbearably smug. Kirk couldn't help but look forward to wiping the smile off his face.

"Captain Kirk," the Vegan began in a self-satisfied manner, "you have had plenty of time to come to a decision regarding my offer. I trust that you have come to one. I am a patient man, but my patience has its limits. I want an answer, Kirk, and there's only one you can give me if you want to see that Karon creature alive again."

"Yes, Mr. Krenga," Kirk replied pleasantly, "I have come to a decision. But I can't guarantee you're going to like it. Now, Mr. Scott - energise!"

Uhura kept the image on screen and they were able to witness the absolute pandemonium as the Vegan suddenly faded and disappeared from his crewmates' view. For a moment they stared at each other and at the empty Captain's chair blankly, they they broke out in a hysterical hubbub of alien languages, all running in different directions. at once, falling over each other, cursing and squabbling and cuffing each other in their disorganised attempt to ascertain what had happened to their leader and what to do next. They didn't look like they were about to launch an attack on the Enterprise, but Chekov didn't relax his vigilance. As they watched, a fight broke out between the Andorians. One of the Orions tried to break it up and was immediately set upon by the combatants. Finally, someone managed to hit a switch, or, more likely, fell on it, and the screen went blank.

"That," said Kirk slowly, "is what I call a well-disciplined crew." He spoke into the intercom. "Kirk to Transporter Room - have you got him, Scotty?"

"Aye, sir, that we have. He was none too pleased about his - abduction, he called it. Dr. McCoy dragged him off to Sickbay with the help of six Security men. Believe me, they were needed. He's shouting that his men will be along to make us pay, Captain." Somehow, Scotty didn't sound too worried - more amused than anything. The Chief Engineer was still extremely put out at the Vegan's treatment of Karon, and the look on Krenga's face when he had found himself unexpectedly aboard the Enterprise had made up for it a little.

"Somehow I don't think so, Scotty." Kirk couldn't help but grin. "Good work, Scotty. Kirk out."

"Captain." Spock spoke suddenly from his Science station. "Krenga's ship has just warped out of orbit. It appears that they are not, after all, planning to rescue their Captain."

"I thought they might not," Kirk said dryly. "Let them go. Our main concern at the moment is Karon. I have an appointment in Sickbay. Mr. Sulu, you have the conn."

Kirk and Spock arrived in Sickbay no more than a few minutes after Krenga had been transported aboard; but McCoy had worked as efficiently as ever, and by the time they walked through the door, McCoy had already got Krenga on a

diagnostic bed, partially comatose, and heavily under the effects of a truth drug. Nearby stood a security man. Just in case.

"Well, Jim, he's all yours," said McCoy as he saw them. "But I'm afraid it isn't going to be as easy as we thought. I've already asked him a few preliminary questions, and it seems there are a lot of things he just doesn't know. Apparently navigation isn't his speciality. I don't think he's got the faintest idea where they took Karon."

High above in the night sky a distant comet could be seen. It was a beautiful sight, but it didn't really break the monotony for the exhausted figure that leaned against a rock and watched it.

It had been six hours since they had left him there, and Karon knew that if help did not come within the next two he would be dead.

Krenga and his companions had taken great delight in telling him that his life support suit only had the capability to remain operative for eight hours, before they had gone back to their ship and left him alone on the lifeless planetoid where he would die from lack of air and cold in about two hours. It might be sooner; he could not tell without a chronometer, and he was only guessing that he had been there about six hours. It seemed like six months since they had dumped him there to die, alone and bruised from their treatment of him.

They hadn't actually hurt him much; they didn't need to. The lack of atmosphere on the small planet would see an end to him soon enough; but the fight in the bar had been rough, and they had not been gentle with him afterwards. He felt bruised all over, and could not move his right leg very much. Not that it would matter for long. Karon did not expect help to come.

His captors had told him gloatingly of their plan; Karon had not bothered to tell them that they wouldn't succeed. Starfleet's orders concerning hostages were quite specific; Starfleet personnel knew all the risks when they joined the service. But it would not have made any difference even if Captain Kirk had been able to accede to their demands; the Vegan had no intention of telling him where they had left Karon even if he did pay. So either way, Karon would be dead.

He tried to shift his painful right leg to a more comfortable position, and felt a flurry of movement within his suit. He cringed, then forced himself to relax again as much as he could. One of the Orions had thought it would be the ultimate joke to put one of the furry creatures inside the life-support suit they had put on him. Yet all he could feel was sadness that when his air supply ran out the creature, too, would die. Odd that it had stopped hissing. Perhaps it knew he meant it no harm.

How ironic, he thought with a stab of sorrow, that when finally he thought he had found a place where he might, just might, make a little niche for himself, he should be taken to such a godforsaken place to die. He realised that at that moment he felt neither Klingon not Human. Just himself. And not afraid; only sad. And lonelier than ever.

"Jim, this is hopeless. It's just too big an area to search." McCoy shrugged helplessly as he stood behind Kirk's Command Chair.

"Not so big an area as it was before Spock asked Krenga was it a planet without atmosphere they left him on,"Kirk replied grimly. "If Spock hadn't realised the only other solution to the time limit on Karon's life, barring injury, was that they had marooned him on such a place in a life-support suit, we'd still be searching all the other planets in this quadrant as well."

"It's still too big a search area," McCoy objected. "We'll never find him in time!"

"Nevertheless we'll keep on trying." Kirk knew McCoy was the last person who would tell him seriously to give up the search; Bones just felt as helpless as he did. Yet Kirk couldn't quite give up hope yet; he remembered the times when he had refused to give up hope on Spock's or McCoy's life when it had looked to everyone else as if all hope was lost. He glanced momentarily behind him to where McCoy was pacing fretfully, nearly driving half the Bridge crew mad with his fidgeting; then he looked over to where Spock sat quietly at his Science station; his solid presence a calming influence. He was very, very glad it was not either of his two dear friends for whom he was desperately searching against time. Poor Karon, thought Kirk suddenly. He hasn't anyone to worry about him, not as a friend would. Then he realised that they were worrying about him, all of them. He wondered if Karon would ever know that.

He was beginning to feel the cold badly now; it would not be long before his air supply ran out completely. Then it would all be over. He wondered if they would ever find his body; not that it really mattered. Karon had no real home for them to carry him to. He didn't really think they would have attempted to search for him; how could they - they would have had no idea where to look.

Yet somehow, despite all the times he had been badly let down in his life, during those last few minutes before his air supply ran out, the faces of his Captain and the Vulcan kept flashing through his weary mind. They were not, he felt in his soul, the kind of people to leave anyone to die such a lonely death as he faced without even attempting a rescue, even one such as he. He was glad he had been given the chance to serve on a ship which carried such people; but they would be too late, if they ever got this far, and they would never know that his few weeks on the Enterprise had been the only time in his life he had come anything close to a feeling of belonging.

"Are you sure this is the most efficient search pattern, Spock?" McCoy questioned irritably. Kirk had at times during the last hours been sorely tempted to ask him if he had anything to do in Sickbay, but had resisted the temptation.

"Indeed, Doctor," replied the Vulcan without a trace of irony. "Using this search pattern we have been able to search the maximum number of uninhabited planets and large asteroids possible within the limited amount of time."

"But you still haven't found him," McCoy went on, "and according to what we got out of that Vegan, his life support suit is due to run out of oxygen any time now."

Spock did not reply; only stared at the viewscreen, which showed the uninhabited system they were presently searching; it was their last chance to find Karon alive, he knew. The search pattern had been completely logical; the only one to follow. But would it help them save Karon?

He turned back to his viewer; they were just coming into sensor range.

Then he saw the readings he had been looking for for hours. "The fifth planet, Captain." He spoke urgently, for him. "I am receiving Klingon/Human hybrid life form readings. They are not strong."

The last of his air was going now; the terrible cold was setting in, and the pain of suffocation beginning. He wasn't sure if the creature was still alive or not; he wasn't sure of anything, except that his death was only moments away.

Then he began to hallucinate; figures had appeared on the cold, rocky ground before him; they seemed to be racing towards him. Karon closed his eyes. The blackness took him.

"Plug in that oxygen now, Spock!" McCoy ordered unnecessarily as he passed

his scanner over the prone form of Karon.

Spock had already attached the oxygen to Karon's useless suit and was watching the Klingon/Human's face for the slightest sign of life.

The moment he saw Karon's chest begin to rise and fall he gave the order to energise. McCoy had not wanted Karon transported aboard until he saw for himself what exactly was wrong with him. They had very nearly left it too late. But not quite too late.

As the walls of the Transporter Room appeared round them, McCoy was using his spray hypo and waving for the waiting medical team to put Karon on the stretcher. Also waiting was Kirk, who joined Spock and McCoy on the platform where they knelt by Karon.

"He's alive, Jim," McCoy answered Kirk's unspoken question as he removed his helmet. "We got there just in time."

Kirk breathed a sigh of relief just as Karon's eyes flickered open.

Spock carefully removed the Klingon/Human's helmet.

"How did you find me?" gasped Karon, not really believing that he was alive at all.

"Oh, we just followed the logical procedures," said McCoy wryly, with a grin. Spock didn't rise to the bait.

"The creature," Karon gasped inexplicably. "Is it alive?"

McCoy, Spock and Kirk looked anxiously at each other. Had Karon been without oxygen just too long?

"In my suit - they put it in." Karon was struggling to sit up, but was restrained by McCoy.

"So that's what those readings were." McCoy almost laughed as understanding came. "I thought the scanner was malfunctioning. Help me get this suit off him."

"Captain," said Karon urgently, grabbing Kirk's arm with a strength he didn't look capable of possessing at that moment. "I don't know how to say this - but thank you."

"That's all right, Karon," Kirk replied gently. "We're just glad to get you back in one piece."

The 'creature' had also survived the ordeal. Spock and McCoy removed it from Karon's suit. Kirk took one look and ordered it to be confined in Sickbay under McCoy's special responsibility. He did not want to see it.

As the medical team lifted him onto the stretcher, a thoroughly grateful Karon was nevertheless slightly puzzled at some aspects of his Captain's behaviour.

But just then, Karon didn't care. He was back home on the Enterprise.

Karon spent the best part of a week recuperating in Sickbay. He was, according to the good Doctor, quite the worst patient he had ever had to look after, with the notable exceptions of the Captain and First Officer of the Enterprise.

Yet Karon himself, despite the boredom of being confined to bed after he had recovered enough from his ordeal to begin to get bored, found that he liked the Chief Medical Officer of the Enterprise more and more, in spite of his peculiar sense of humour. McCoy was clearly a deeply caring person where his patients, and his friends, were concerned, despite the sometimes gruff manner he hid his affection behind.

Twice, Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock came to visit him, and he was actually able to find the words to thank them properly for all they had done for him. Uhura,

Sulu and Chekov came to visit him several times, and Sulu made him promise to fence with him when he was fully recovered. The discovery of their shared interest cheered him up yet further, and that, coupled with the friendly conversations he had with Nurse Chapel, went a long way to make him really feel a sense of, at last, belonging. At least among the Enterprise officers. He still had to return to the Engine Room and find what sort of reception awaited him there.

Mr. Scott had also visited him several times, and had made no mention of the incident in Engineering. He told Karon he was looking forward to having him back on duty, and Karon found he believed it; yet as the days passed and Dr. McCoy finally passed him fit to return to duty, he began to experience feelings of trepidation as to his return to Engineering. How would the people he had to work with day by day receive him?

The Enterprise continued on her way through the interstellar vastness, a home for over four hundred people in the star-dotted blackness of space. Life on the Bridge went on much as usual, while in Engineering a certain lieutenant had finally returned to duty, to be greeted by politeness if not exactly friendship. Scotty, it seemed, had not let them get off lightly.

While the manner of his crewmates in Engineering made him withdraw into himself more than he had done since his rescue, Karon was still determined not to make any mistakes whatsoever. He was determined that he was going to fit in on the Enterprise, and to be a valuable member of her crew, if only to show Captain Kirk how grateful he was to him. This time he was not going to let his terrible Klingon temper get the better of him, no matter what happened.

On the Bridge, James Kirk signed some fuel consumption reports, stretched, and was about to get up from his chair. He would have a word with Spock and see if he was going to come and finish that game of chess.

But James Kirk was not destined to go off duty just yet; at that moment the intercom bleeped.

"Engineering to Captain Kirk!"

"Kirk here."

"Ensign Yarrow here, sir - we've got an emergency! Mr. Scott's been hurt, and the matter/anti-matter flow is in danger of becoming imbalanced! Lt. Karon's trying to fix it - he won't let anyone else touch it!"

"Right, Ensign - we'll be right down. Let Lt. Karon carry on. Kirk out."

The tension on the Bridge was almost tangible. Kirk couldn't imagine what had happened to cause such a crisis, but he and Spock had to get down there immediately. If the situation got worse, there would be nothing they could do on the Bridge that would help. Or anywhere else, for that matter.

"Sound Red Alert. Dr. McCoy to Engineering immediately. Kirk out." And Scotty? What had happened to Scotty? Kirk joined Spock at the turbolift doors and stepped inside, trying not to think of what would happen if Karon wasn't as good as Scotty thought he was.

The journey to Engineering seemed to take for ever. When the turbolift finally stopped, Kirk and Spock ran the rest of the way, to be greeted by a scene both of intense activity and watchful anxiety. Intense activity on the part of McCoy, treating the fallen Chief Engineer, and Karon, working at the fault in the matter/anti-matter flow control. The anxiety was on the part of the rest of the Engineering personnel, who watched, either at their posts or gathered round Karon as he struggled to repair the fault before any imbalance could become critical. No-one who watched was unaware that this was a life or death situation, for them and everyone else on the Enterprise.

After the control had exploded and knocked the Chief Engineer to the floor,

they had quickly given up their attempts to try and effect a repair for themselves; within seconds Karon had been there, refusing to allow anyone else anywhere near it; his manner was almost as it had been during his earlier outburst, and no-one had either dared, or wanted, to challenge him. They had all witnessed what he was capable of when crossed, and none of them wanted to risk an outburst of Klingon temper at such a time.

If he had been incompetent, it would have been a different matter, but they all knew that, popular or not, Karon was the person best fitted to try and save the situation while Mr. Scott was out of action.

So now they all stood watching the Klingon/Human in his attempts to save them all, while those nearest, including the young female yeoman who had informed the Captain of the situation passed him tools in response to barked orders.

Kirk and Spock went quickly to Karon, but he was too immersed in his task either to acknowledge or consciously notice their presence.

Kirk looked at Spock; he had expected the Vulcan to take over from Karon, but Spock shook his head. Karon was doing everything right, and an interruption at that stage might prove fatal.

And as they too watched, they became aware of something; Karon at that moment was wholly Klingon, as he gave commands for tools and held the rest of Engineering at bay. But this time he was using his personality to best effect. And as Kirk held his breath he saw the matter/anti-matter indicator stabilize, and breathed again; Karon had done it.

McCoy saw the medical team carry the still unconscious Scotty out of Engineering, then came over to where Kirk stood. Spock was running a check to ascertain that everything in Engineering was now as it should be; it had been immediately obvious to the Vulcan that the accident had been caused by someone not being as careful about their work as they ought to have been. How such a thing could have happened he didn't know, but Ensign Yarrow had informed him that the person most likely responsible was probably one and the same as the person responsible for the earlier practical joke on Lt. Karon.

Apparently several minor incidents had occurred since the person in question had been assigned to the Enterprise, and Mr. Scott had just pinpointed who it was. But before Scotty had been able to suspend the suspect from duty, the accident had happened. Rarely did it happen that a person unfit for Starship duty slipped through the nets of Starfleet Academy, but very occasionally it did happen. And this time it had happened to the Enterprise. Spock saw Kirk frown as Yarrow told him the news; it appeared someone would have to go. But it wouldn't be Lt. Karon. Spock knew Kirk would be glad about that; Karon had proved his worth.

"How is he, Bones?" McCoy's preliminary examination had revealed nothing serious, and there couldn't be or the Doctor would be following the Medical Team to Sickbay, but Kirk still wanted to know how Scott was.

"It wasn't a serious explosion, Jim," McCoy replied, his relieved manner indicating that Scotty really was all right, "although the results could have been. He hasn't suffered any injuries other than knocking himself out on a sharp corner when the shock of the explosion knocked him backwards. Actually, the shock he received was probably less than Karon got a few days ago; but Scotty hasn't got half-Klingon physiology. He'll be coming round soon, and no doubt will insist on returning to duty tomorrow. Christine will keep her eye on him, but all the same, I think I'll be off to Sickbay now, before Spock starts estimating the chances of anything like this happening again! By the way, Jim, before I go - who was it that Scotty suspected of causing all this?"

"Ensign Green. That's who it was, according to Ensign Yarrow. I dismissed him from duty as soon as she told me what Scotty had found out. Seems she was instrumental in bringing certain things to Scotty's notice, and had a good idea that he was about to accuse Green. But before he had a chance to tell me, or suspend Green, this little lot happened. Yarrow shows promise, though, and I'm just thankful we were able to find out about him before it was too late. It might well have been, if not for Karon. As for Green, he admitted everything when I confronted him with it just now. I've confined him to his quarters." That was the aspect of the situation that worried Kirk the most, now that the Enterprise and Scotty were both out of danger. They had somehow to prevent such an occurrence ever happening again...even the possibility of such an occurrence ever happening again. Yet Yarrow had told him that Green had appeared perfectly normal and generally satisfactory at his work; it had been very hard to tell there was something odd about him. Practical jokes were one thing; incompetence in a Starship's Engineering Department, or any other department for that matter, could not be tolerated, for the safety of all concerned.

"Yes, Jim - I'd been meaning to take another reading on Green's psychological profile; the last one I did showed some small changed I wasn't happy about. But I think I know of some modifications to my tests which will stop anything like this slipping through again."

"Agreed, Bones, and I think Starfleet will be making a few modifications of their own when my report gets through. But since Spock and Karon have everything under control here, and Scotty's going to be O.K., I think it's about time I was getting back to the Bridge."

"Right, Jim," replied McCoy thoughtfully. "But one thing about this situation - at least we know now how Karon reacts under pressure. That talk Spock had with him really seems to have done some good. I wonder what he said to him?"

Kirk couldn't help but smile as he watched McCoy leave for Sickbay. Spock hadn't told him exactly what he had said to Karon, either. But it seemed to be working, whatever it was. As he, too, left Engineering, he noticed Ensign Yarrow and one or two others there talking to Karon in a far friendlier manner than he had seen anyone except the Bridge crew speak to him before. And he was satisfied to see Karon apparently returning the proffered friendship as best he could. Green might actually have done Karon a good turn.

The next few days passed, and there were no more incidents out of the ordinary; no more traumas in Engineering or anywhere else.

When the Enterprise was ordered to Chadris, an open planet not too far from Klingon territory (not far enough, as Chekov commented!) to answer a request for technological aid on the developing planet, Kirk was only too pleased to oblige. A nice straightforward mission was just what they all needed. And it would give some of the newer crew members a chance to get some experience of landing party duty.

Chadris was a world not yet allied to Federation or Empire. It was one of those planets with which contact by alien life had been made before its society's evolution had developed to the necessary stage. Such occurrances were thankfully a great deal more rare since the Prime Directive had come into force, and in Chadris' case, the cultural contamination had not been severe, nor caused by Terrans. Andorians had first landed there several decades before, to the intense surprise of the natives, who had been almost totally unaware of the possibility that life existed elsewhere but on their planet, except for some enlightened thinkers. However, the Chadris were an adaptable people, and after their initial hysterics at seeing blue-skinned, man-sized insects, they had offered the Andorians hospitality if not exactly friendship.

Since contact had been made, the Chadris had wisely expressed the wish to remain unaligned to the Federation until such time as its people felt they had developed enough to take part fully in all that entailed, but since contact had

oeen made, the Federation had taken upon itself, as it did in all such cases, to assist Chadris in any way possible whenever a request for aid was made. That had occurred only infrequently, and the transmitting equipment installed by Federation communication experts had remained largely unused. But this time it had been used, a request made, and the Enterprise was on her way.

"What amazes me," said McCoy wryly as he stood behind Kirk's chair, "is that the Klingons have never bothered the Chadris. I didn't think they believed in the Prime Directive."

"They don't, Bones," Kirk replied with a grin as he watched the blue-grey sphere which was the world of their destination showing now on the main Bridge viewscreen as they approached it. "All I can think is that the Chadris don't have anything the Klingons might want, otherwise they would have been there a long time ago."

"There is nothing in the reports to suggest that they have not made a visit," Spock put in, stepping down to stand behind Kirk on the other side, hands behind his back. "Federation contact with the Chadris has been very limited, and in respect to their wish for privacy, no attempt has been made to discover any more about their culture than information they were willing to volunteer. When we step on the surface of that planet, we will be the first Federation representatives to set foot there for twenty-two point three nine years."

"What help have they requested, exactly?" McCoy asked Kirk, ignoring Spock's determined accuracy.

"They have requested help in setting up a solar power plant," Kirk replied. "Slightly archaic, perhaps, compared to some of the methods we have now, but a form of energy they have worked out for themselves can be harnessed. Apparently their winter is almost due, and winters on Chadris are very hard; last winter many died from the cold, and this year's harvest has not been good. So their leaders decided it was better that they request food, and help to build a power plant, whose technology they are still years away from understanding properly, than to allow many more people to die in another harsh winter. So here we are."

"Parking orbit will be achieved in three minutes, Captain." Sulu spoke from his console, half-turning as he did so.

"Very good, Mr. Sulu. Uhura, as soon as we're in orbit, open a channel to that transmitter and inform the Chadris a landing party will beam down in exactly one hour, at any point which will be convenient for their leaders to meet us."

"YES, Captain." Uhura privately hoped that she might be on the landing party; R & R on a space station was one thing, but the chance to walk the surface of another world was one of the things that Starship service was all about.

Uhura got her wish. Exactly one hour later she stood in the Transporter Room ready to beam down to Chadris and service the transmitting equipment. Into the room came the Captain, Mr. Spock with his ubiquitous tricorder, and Dr. McCoy with his medikit. They were closely followed by Scotty and Karon. As soon as they were all assembled they stepped onto the platform, and the Captain gave the order to energize.

On the planet's surface they were greeted by seven extremely nervous men; clearly the Chadris had an intense dislike of contact with outworlders, and they must have considered their plight quite desperate to have used the transmitting equipment left to them. Already the chill in the air was very noticeable, and the beginning of the Chadris winter was still several weeks away; as he stepped forward to introduce himself to the humanoids, Kirk had already decided that Chadris was not a place he would wish to pass the winter.

"I am Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship Enterprise," he began, extending a hand and wondering if the Chadris had ever heard of that particular Terran custom. "We are here to give you the requested help in building a solar power plant, and any other aid you might need."

Apparently they did not know the custom, for instead of taking Kirk's hand, the man he had addressed as looking like the leader ignored it and instead performed a small bow.

"Greetings, Captain Kirk," he said in a quiet voice. "I am Werne, one of the seven chosen ones of the Chadris. The other six you see before you. It was my decision to call upon your Federation for help. We offer you our hospitality." Werne indicated the small houses of a nearby township.

Kirk was pleasantly surprised; from the reports he had read he had expected the Chadris to be a little cold in their reception; a little stand-offish, even. They were certainly reserved, but the immediate offer of hospitality was at least civilised. And the humanoid's English had been almost perfect, if heavily accented; there had been no need to use the translator. The Chadris might be an underdeveloped people, but it was clear they were not unintelligent; Werne, at least, had made full use of the small amount of information tapes which had been left behind.

As the landing party followed the seven 'chosen ones' along the narrow track which led to the township, Kirk noticed that while the Chadris barely gave the Humans in the landing party a look, they seemed extremely interested in both Spock and Karon, if the number of surreptitious glances they were receiving was anything to go by. He assumed it had to do with the fact that the Chadris and Terrans were very similar in appearance, except for the Chadris' intricate pleated hairdos. If they were showing that much interest, not to mention a small amount of underlying apprehension, at the appearances of Spock and Karon, he didn't wonder that the arrival of Andorians on Chadris had been greeted with near hysteria.

The hospitality consisted of a welcoming feast and the expected speeches. The welcome was not lost on the landing party, who all knew how bad the planet's last harvest had been. Kirk made a mental note that before the Enterprise left Chadris he would see to it that they left some food supplies extra to what Starfleet had ordered.

But the speeches lasted only as long as was necessary; both the Chadris and the Enterprise party were anxious that the task of building the solar power plant should begin as soon as possible.

Within two hours of setting foot on the planet, the landing party was in the small underground chamber which housed both the transmitter and the small amount of technical information on Federation languages and other things which had been thought might be useful to them, without contaminating the culture of the planet any more than was necessary.

Uhura confirmed that the transmitter did need both servicing and updating, as she had suspected, and began to run a preliminary check. Within five minutes she had requested tools and other equipment from the Enterprise, and Montgomery Scott had ordered tools, equipment and some of his best engineers. As the Chadris had made it obvious that, as grateful as they might be, they still wished any contact with outworlders to be kept to a minimum, Kirk decided he might as well remain and be what help he could to Spock and Scotty; it would do him good to keep up with some basic engineering; he had to admit that he did quite enjoy that sort of thing, and didn't often get the opportunity to indulge.

The work went well, and the weather remained reasonable, if very cold, though according to the Enterprise's Science Department, it wouldn't last. Snow was due any day now, and the bitter Arctic winds that went with it. It seemed Chadris was in for a very hard winter indeed; Werne's wisdom in calling in the Federation experts was now clear to all, and the Chadris themselves, even those who had grumbled at his decision, could see now that he had all along been right. None of them could forget the deprivations and losses of the last cold term.

Karon, meanwhile, was in his element. Mr. Scott had left a great part of the

organisation of the building of the power plant to him, and even allowed him to take over from the Chief Engineer at whatever times Scotty's presence was required on the Starship.

He stood now on a cold, clear morning supervising the raising into position of the huge solar collecters he himself had helped to design. The Ensign following his orders began to run a final check before they began the final positionir of the collecters.

Karon was gratified that the Ensign, who had worked with him a great deal during the past few days, always followed his orders to the word and immediately. He found that everyone to whom he was superior in rank did so. Discipline on the Enterprise was extremely good anyway, but Karon had the feeling that those assigned to work under him tended to treat him with a little more - he could not decide whether to call it 'respect' or 'apprehension' - than they did some of the other officers. Sometimes their attitude pleased him; at others it made him feel uncomfortable. At least it made for efficiency. He tried to look on the positive side of his dual nature. Acceptance, Mr. Spock had said, was the key, and he was trying. Yet at times he still felt so lonely, even though his new friends among the Enterprise officers did their best to include him in their activities.

He was therefore quite glad when he saw the Vulcan striding across the frost-hardened grass towards him. Even though Mr. Spock had undoubtedly come to run a check on how things were going, he was always glad to see the Vulcan. Here was someone who understood better than anyone else he had ever met how he felt.

Sometimes he had watched the Captain and Mr. Spock talking together when they had not known he was observing them. It was clear that they shared a very deep and special friendship. From what the First Officer had told him on that occasion when he had taken him aside in an attempt to help him, after Karon had reacted so badly and so typically to the practical joke played on him, Karon knew that Mr. Spock had himself experienced years of loneliness. Karon was glad that the Vulcan had a friend like Jim Kirk. He deserved him. They deserved each other. Since his last-minute rescue from the barren, airless planetoid Krenga - now considering his sins in a cell on K10 - had left him on, Karon's respect for his Captain and First Officer knew no bounds. He had never met anyone like them, and would willingly die for either of them if the occasion arose. He wondered if they knew that. His temper still threatened to surface at times, and Karon did not know how much longer he could keep it under control without an outburst; but he was trying, trying all the harder for his efforts to prove worthy of such commanding officers. After all, who else would have even bothered to look for such a one as he against all the odds?

"Good morning Mr. Karon," the Vulcan greeted him. The First Officer must be feeling the cold badly, as a Vulcan, but Karon noticed that he showed no outward sign of it. "I trust that everything is proceeding according to schedule?"

Spock turned and scrutinized the operation taking place. "We must ensure that the solar batteries are fully charged with enough power to fill the Chadris' needs during the winter months. Although why they did not request the building of this plant last spring, instead of at such an inappropriate time of the year escapes me. Most illogical."

Karon had to agree. "Yes, sir. Although I believe that the length of time Werne took to persuade the other chosen ones to agree to his plan has something to do with it."

"Indeed, Mr, Karon. I believe you are correct. The Chadris do show an extreme dislike of contact with anyone not native to their planet. Most curious. The work is proceeding according to schedule?"

"Yes, sir," Karon replied. "These installations should be completed within two Chadris days."

"Very good, Mr. Karon. Carry on."

Karon watched as the First Officer went off towards where the Captain was

discussing something with Mr. Scott. He did not know anyone was approaching him until he felt a light touch on his elbow.

"Hi. How's it going?" It was Ensign Yarrow, newly arrived on duty. Karon turned and smiled at her. It hadn't yet ceased to amaze him that she had taken his part that day when the matter/anti-matter flow had almost reached critical imbalance. He didn't forget either the way she had reacted in that emergency, taking immediately the viewpoint that if the Captain said to let him get on with it, then she had better help, instead of standing back like some of the others had. He couldn't blame them, of course; at that time he had still been very much an unknown quantity in Engineering; they didn't trust him, or his temper, and had feared to interfere in case he had reacted in some unexpected way at the wrong moment. But Jane Yarrow had helped him, and had continued to be friendly towards him. He couldn't help but wonder why she had bothered to be.

"It's going very well, Ensign Yarrow," he replied with a smile as kind as his facial muscles would allow. "We're just positioning the collecters."

"It's 'Jane', not 'Ensign Yarrow', Lieutenant," she grinned back. "I told you."

"Very well - Jane. And it's 'Karon', not 'Lieutenant', at least when we don't have to be formal." Karon had amazed himself. He had never managed to open up that much before. She seemed to have that effect on him.

Yarrow smiled again and went about her duties. At least this time he hadn't frozen her out as completely as usual. She was certain that most of Karon's apparent unfriendliness stemmed from shyness rather than from anything else, as some of the others in Engineering thought. She was also certain that underneath all that gruffness was a person worth getting to know. Well, she wasn't one to give up easily at anything, and she was determined to go on being friendly to Karon until he finally saw she meant it.

"Good morning, Captain, Mr. Scott." Spock had arrived in time to hear the worthy Engineer having a fit of the grumbles.

"Ah, Mr. Spock," Scott greeted the Vulcan gladly, sure of having found someone who would be on his side. "Will ye no' tell the Captain how daft it is to instal a solar power plant just before winter. Plain daft, that's what it is. Yon Chadris haven't a scrap of sense, and they won't even talk to us. How can we teach them to work the plant if they won't come anywhere near us?"

"Indeed, Mr. Scott, the Chadris have not shown themselves to be the most logical of people," Spock had to agree, "but I believe the Captain is fully aware of all the problems you mention."

"I am, Spock, I am." Kirk grinned with amusement. He knew that Scotty also knew perfectly well that so well that he understood all the problems the Chadris had created, but he also knew that to attempt to stop Montgomery Scott in a full flight of grumbles was just downright impossible. "But Scotty, we do have the capability to charge the batteries ready for the winter for them, and if they aren't sociable, well, that isn't a crime and there's nothing we can do about it. As for working the plant, you know it's going to be largely automatic, and Werne and one or two others are coming over later this morning for you to brief them on what needs to be done."

"Aye, Captain, but I'm still no' happy about it. Excuse me, gentlemen; I have work to do." The Chief Engineer stalked off towards where Karon was supervising the work; it was almost complete.

Kirk stood, still grinning at Scott's receding back. He was feeling distinctly cheerful this morning; only two more days and they would be able to leave Chadris. He would be glad to get away from the cold planet and the even colder Chadris people.

"Come on, Spock - let's get back to the ship."

Several hours later, Kirk's quiet off-duty reading in his cabin was rudely interrupted by a call from the surface. It was Karon, and he didn't sound too pleased.

"Yes, Mr. Karon," Kirk said into the intercom. "Go ahead."

"It's the Chadris, Captain," the Klingon/Human's voice said irritably. "They haven't turned up for the briefing. There's no sign of them, and Mr. Scott's waiting. It's very disrespectful to him, sir."

So that was what was getting at Karon. At least it showed Scotty commanded a fair amount of respect from his lieutenant. But Karon was still going to have to watch that temper of his, Kirk could see. He hadn't noticed it before, but when Karon spoke in that particular tone of voice, he sounded a lot likd Kor.

"Very well, Karon," Kirk replied after a moment's thought. "I'll take a party into the township and see why they haven't kept their promise. Tell Mr. Scott I'll soon have them there for him. Kirk out."

Kirk switched the intercom off and frowned. What could be going wrong now? He was beginning to have the nasty feeling that their departure from Chadris was not going to be as smooth as he had hoped. He left his cabin and went in search of Chief Baillie in a not very good mood. He soon found the Chief who organised a team of two Security men to go with Kirk to the township; the Chadris had so far shown no outward sign of hostility, if they were unfriendly, and he didn't think any more than two Security men would be necessary. Actually, he didn't really think he needed anyone to accompany him; the way he was feeling at that moment, James T. Kirk would soon have Werne and his friends winkled out and delivered to Scotty for instruction.

"You want me to come with you, Captain?" Baillie asked as he stood by Kyle behind the transporter controls.

"No, thank you, Mr. Baillie," Kirk said from the platform. "I can manage. Energize." Dammit, did Baillie think he needed a nursemaid?

Once down on Chadris, Kirk lost no time in entering the township, the Security officers having difficulty at times in keeping up with his purposeful strides. One of them nodded meaningfully to the other; he wouldn't like to be that Werne character when the Captain caught up with him!

They entered the quiet street between the stone and timber houses. No-one was about. It did strike Kirk as being a little unusual for no-one to be about at that time of day, but he didn't attach too much importance to it.

Finally, they reached the house which he knew to be Werne's. He could hear faint voices inside. So they were there! Hiding, were they? He'd teach them to hide when his Chief Engineer was waiting to instruct them in the use of the solar power plant they had so carefully built.

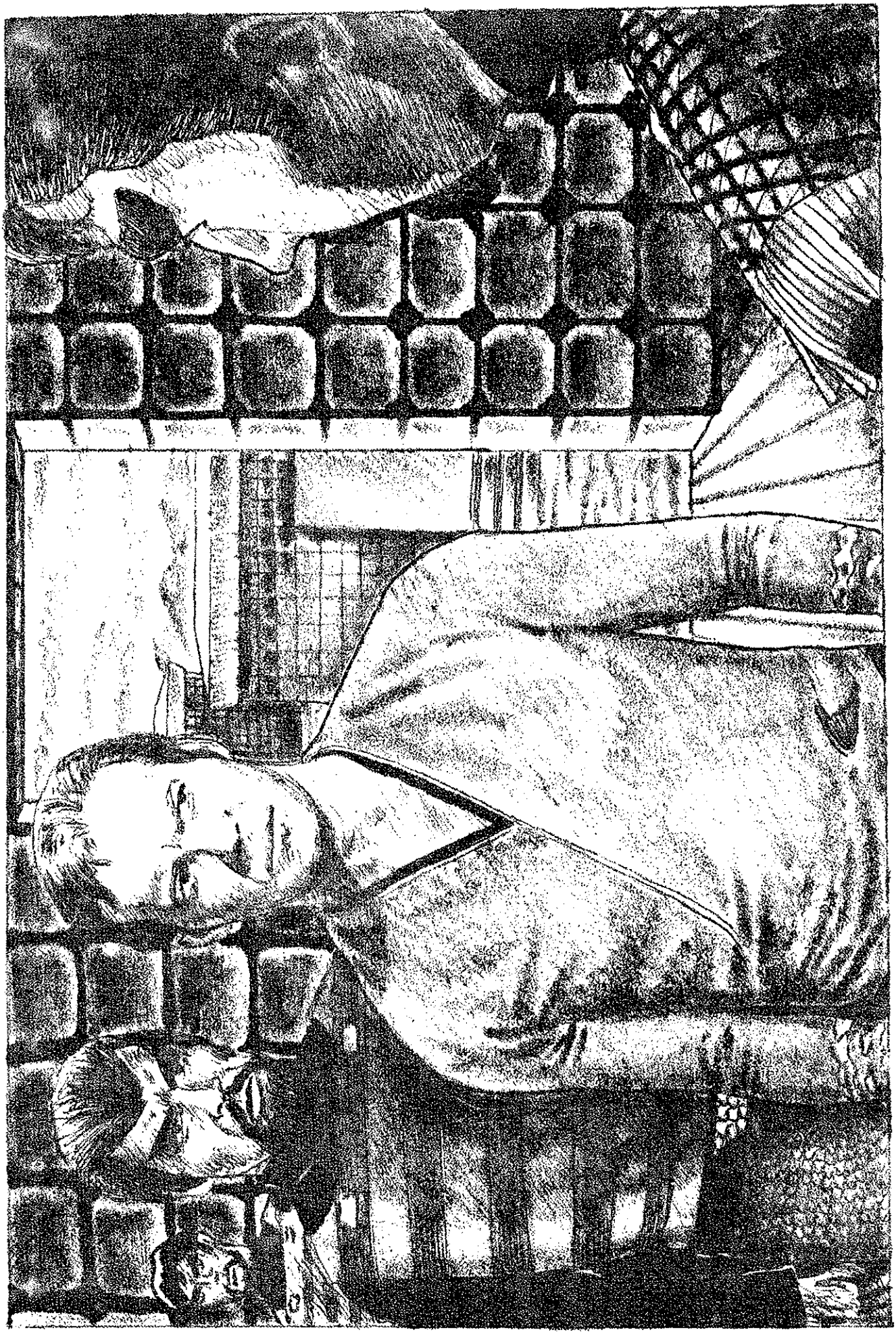
The Captain of the Enterprise marched up the steps to the front door and knocked. He was surprised when it opened to reveal Werne and some of the other chosen ones sitting cross-legged on the floor of the darkened room within. They looked almost as if they were waiting for him.

"Now listen, Werne, my friend..." Kirk began in the command tone as he stepped into the room, the two Security men following. But he spoke no other words, for at that moment he heard a sound behind him that was unmistakable.

He froze, then spun round aghast, to see the sight that he knew would be facing him.

The two Security officers were dead, victims of Klingon disrupters. And grinning evilly at Kirk was a Klingon officer, accompanied by nine other Klingons, their deadly weapons trained onto both the hapless Chadris and James Kirk.

"Ah, Captain Kirk, I believe," the Klingon gloated. "You have no idea how much pleasure it gives me to see you here. My name is Kurth. I do not think you will forget it."



"How long do you think it will be before my men come to get me?" Kirk demanded. They had tied him to a chair, not particularly gently, and it bothered him that Kurth didn't seem at all worried about that eventuality. "Where is your ship?"

"Ship? There is no ship, Captain." Kurth seemed amused. "No ship for yours to detect."

"Then how did you get here?" Kirk didn't care that the nearest burly Klingon looked like he wanted to thrash him for talking to his commander in such a fashion. Knowing the Klingons, they were only waiting their moment, anyway.

"It will do no harm to tell you," Kurth growled. "It will not help you, but I think you may appreciate the subtlety of our plans. Surely the Federation did not think we would be unaware of their plans for this planet? We intercepted their call for assistance. Fools! We have long known that the Federation visited this world, and knowing also how the Federation wants all peoples to be under its sway, we knew the Earthers and their friends would return. We have been waiting." Kurth was enjoying himself; it pleased him to let the Earther Captain know how clever they had been. "Not long after these Chadris worms sent their call for aid, my team and I were sent here. We have been in hiding, waiting for you. Our plan was to kill as many of you as possible, destroy your installations, and blame it all on the Chadris." Kurth grinned at the simplicity of the plan.

"What about the Chadris? What makes you think they'd keep quiet about it?" Kirk could see big holes in the Klingons' precious plan.

"Because if we speak they will destroy us. All of us!" It was Werne who had spoken; the Chadris was rewarded for his efforts by a sharp blow which knocked him unconscious to the ground.

Several things were now becoming clearer to Kirk. When they had first arrived on the planet, the Chadris had made themselves a little scarce, but not as positively invisible as they had been the last few days. He was beginning to see why.

"What makes you think my men won't realise what's been going on? What about the Organian Peace Treaty?"

A look of blind fury crossed Kurth's evil face at Kirk's mention of the Organians and the Treaty.

"Your men," the Klingon hissed, "will never suspect. Neither will they find you. Either way it does not matter. When we volunteered for this mission, we knew full well that we might lose our lives completing it. But we will complete it. And now we have a bonus. When I discovered that the Earther commanding the interference to this world was none other than the 'famous' Captain Kirk, I was overjoyed. You see, Captain, I am going to kill you. There is a matter of family honour to be put right. Koloth is my cousin, and you shamed him. I am only sorry that I cannot destroy your ship as well. When our mission is complete, if we survive we will use your transmitter to call transport from Klingon. The Federation and the Organian fools will never know what really happened. You know, but that has no meaning; for you, James Kirk, will be dead."

Spock was worried. He had beamed back up to the Enterprise to be informed that the Captain, who had gone off with two Security men to see to the matter of the Chadris' unwillingness to co-operate, had not yet returned. It was now three hours since Kirk had left the ship, and no word had been heard from him.

He had left Sulu in command, and was on his way to the transporter room to meet another Security team. Spock didn't know what had gone wrong, but he knew something had. He was actually somewhat relieved to see Dr. McCoy waiting for him by the door of the Transporter Room. The Doctor might well be of some help.

"Well, Spock, what's the news?" McCoy greeted him, clearly concerned.

"There is none, Doctor, save that the Captain is missing. Come, if a search is to be made, we have no time to waste."

Less than five minutes later, Spock, McCoy and the Security team were standing in Werne's house; there was no sign of the Captain, but the Chadris sported a suspicious-looking bruise on his face.

The Chadris denied that Kirk had ever been there, explained that they had simply forgotten their appointment with Mr. Scott, a failing of theirs, and what was it all about?

Spock didn't believe a word of it. He didn't know what was going on, but all his senses told him that something was. And it had to do with Jim's disappearance. Spock listened to several more minutes of the Chadris' unconvincing stories, then ordered that Werne should be taken, forcibly if necessary, to the Enterprise, where he would be held either until the Captain returned safely or until the Chadris decided to tell what they knew. This decision met with the intense approval of McCoy, but not of Werne himself, who suddenly developed a great fear of setting foot on a Starship. Werne's protests notwithstanding, three minutes later he was sitting in the Enterprise Briefing Room, where he was subjected to much questioning, most of which he either could not, or would not, answer.

"This is getting us nowhere, Spock," McCoy said irritably to the Vulcan, having asked him to step out into the corridor where Werne could not hear him. "It's four hours now since Jim disappeared, and that Chadris in there is not going to talk. I don't know what reason he's got for keeping quiet, especially considering all the threats that have been made to him. Either he doesn't believe them or he's got a mighty powerful reason for not talking. We can't use the truth drug we used on Krenga; it doesn't suit Chadris physiology, and could be dangerous for him. So what are you going to do?"

Spock regarded the Doctor calmly; he knew McCoy well enough by now to realise that he was not questioning what Spock had done, or was doing; he was merely concerned for Jim's safety. That was a sentiment Spock could understand entirely. The Vulcan was becoming more worried by the minute.

"Doctor, everything possible is being done; Werne is being questioned, landing parties are searching for the Captain, and Mr. Chekov has begun a sensor scan of the planet's surface, which is unlikely to be successful due to the similarities between Chadris and Terran life form readings. What more would you have me do?"

McCoy sighed and looked away. "I know, Spock. I know you're doing all you can. I know he's only been gone four hours, but I know something is badly wrong. You do too, don't you?"

Spock, however, was prevented from answering by Uhura's voice paging him from an intercom.

"Yes, Lieutenant, what is it?"

"I'm receiving a call from Mr. Scott by the power plant installation, Mr. Spock. He says a Chadris female has just come up to him in an anxious state, demanding to see whoever is in charge. He wants to know will you beam down and talk to her, sir."

Spock considered the possibilities for a moment. This could be the breakthrough he had been waiting for.

"No, Lieutenant - inform Mr. Scott she is to be beamed up to the Enterprise immediately. I will meet her in the Transporter Room. Spock out."

When Spock arrived in the Transporter Room with McCoy on his heels, the form of a Chadris female was just materialising on the platform.

Uhura had said she was anxious, but as she stepped warily down from the platform, Spock concluded that she was completely terrified of something; and not of being on a Starship, either. Although she hid most of her fear successfully, the Vulcan could tell that the young Chadris was very afraid of something.

"You are in charge?" she demanded, coming up to Spock and fixing him with a determined look. She showed no sign of apprehension at his appearance, as so many of her fellows had.

"I am First Officer Spock, this is Dr. McCoy. I am what you term 'in charge' in the absence of Captain Kirk. What do you wish to see me about?"

"About your Captain. But I won't say a word until I've seen Werne."

"Now, just a minute, young woman..." McCoy began, suddenly infuriated by her cavalier manner. Then he felt Spock's restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Very well, Miss...?" replied the Vulcan politely.

"Wandel - my name's Wandel," the Chadris girl almost snapped.

"Very well, Miss Wandel. You may see Werne immediately. This way."

The journey to the Briefing Room where Werne was still being questioned did not take long; Spock noticed that the young woman took a singular disinterest in the fact that she was on a Starship for the first time in her life; she was far too concerned with seeing Werne, and hid her concern and her fear underneath a mask of irritability.

McCoy was still fuming, although he knew Spock was right to let her see Werne if it made her talk any quicker. But he had the suspicion she might have something to do with Jim's disappearance.

Their entry into the briefing room was met with a look of utter amazement by Werne, closely followed by one of defeat and dejection.

"Sister," he spoke finally, sadly, "why have you come here? Do you not know what they will do to our people now? They will know you came here of your own free will. They always know everything. It is the end."

McCoy watched, feeling a little confused, wondering who 'they' were, his suspicions thoroughly aroused.

Spock also watched, alarm bells going off in his mind. He suddenly knew who 'they' were. He should have thought of that earlier! Yet they had not detected any spacecraft in the vicinity.

But Wandel was crossing the room to where Werne sat, taking his hands between her own and smiling. She did not look so afraid any more.

"But how will they know, Werne?" she was saying. "I do not believe they do. They are liars - why do you and the other men always believe what they say? I have not seen that they are any more powerful than those who have come to help us - they would never help anyone!"

"But Wandel - they said, they swore if any of us told they were here, or what had happened to Captain Kirk, that they would return when the Enterprise has left; they will return and kill us all - wipe out our people! And they will do it - have you and I not seen their cruelty?" Now it was Werne who was terrified.

"Yes, they are cruel," replied Wandel, "but these people here, they are not. They will help us if we ask them, Werne. And I think they have the power to fight the Klingons."

"Klingons?" said Baillie, alarmed.

"Yes, Mr. Baillie, Klingons," said Spock, not surprised.

"I knew it!" McCoy almost shouted.

McCoy was in Spock's cabin, pacing up and down again while the Vulcan sat with his fingers steepled in front of him, trying to think of a solution that would not result in Jim's death. He had been sitting thinking for almost an hour without result. Now McCoy had come and was not making it any easier.

"But what can we do?" McCoy was asking helplessly. "If we try and rescue Jim, they'll kill him. Wandel said so, and I believe her. We'll never get near those old mines where they're hiding without being discovered. Then they'll kill him. That Kurth or whatever his name is is going to anyway. What can we do, Spock? Can't you think of anything?"

"I am attempting to, Doctor," Spock replied more harshly than he meant to, "but it is difficult to think while you are speaking so loudly. There has to be a logical solution, if only I can find it."

"I'm sorry, Spock." McCoy finally sat down, instantly contrite when he heard the concern in the Vulcan's voice. "It's just that I'm as worried as you are. Damn those Klingons! They've been too clever for us this time! They're down too deep in that mine for us to use the ship's phasers to stun them all; and no wonder we didn't detect them with the sensors. Oh, what are we going to do, Spock?"

McCoy looked as if he might stand up and resume his pacing, but his intention, and any reply Spock might have been going to make, was interrupted by a buzz at the cabin door.

"Come," said Spock.

The doors slid open to reveal Karon.

"Mr. Spock - Dr. McCoy," said the Klingon/Human gruffly, but as politely as he could command his voice to speak, "please forgive my intrusion, but I think I have an idea which may help the Captain."

McCoy looked at Spock disbelievingly; true, Karon knew what was going on; he had been in the briefing room towards the end of the time when Werne and Wandel had been telling their story; Scotty had sent him to find out if the young woman's appearance had anything to do with the solar power installations; Scotty still feared that the Chadris might suddenly decide they didn't want the alien machinery after all. But how could Karon think of something if they couldn't?

Spock, however, was prepared to listen to anything which might help Jim.

"Yes, Mr. Karon? I should be pleased to hear your idea."

"Thank you, sir." Karon was grateful for at least being given the chance to speak; his scheme might not work, and it would certainly be dangerous; but he couldn't see any other way Captain Kirk could be helped. He could see that neither the First Officer nor the Doctor had been able to think of anything.

"I am the only member of the crew who might be able to approach the Klingons without them immediately killing the Captain. I would need a small amount of disguise; a beard, and a Klingon uniform. I could go to them, tell them I have been sent from Klingon with further orders, and demand to see the prisoner. When they have taken me to the Captain, I could use a stun grenade powerful enough to knock out everyone there. While we are all unconscious, you could come and take them all prisoner, and rescue the Captain and myself."

"It's a good idea, Karon, but it could be very dangerous for you. They might not believe your story. You'd probably get killed." McCoy was certainly grateful to the Klingon/Human for his gallant offer, but he had to point out the dangers involved.

But Karon had already considered the dangers. "They might not believe my story, Doctor, but they would certainly believe I am a Klingon. There is, I admit, the slight chance that they would recognise me; after all, I am very much a 'wanted person' as far as they are concerned. But it is only a small chance, and outweighed by the chance such a plan gives for rescuing the Captain. Please let me attempt it, sir - " Karon appealed directly to Spock. "Captain Kirk has been so good to me - I must try to help him. I know that you would volunteer to risk your life if it would help the Captain. Well, perhaps I can help him. Please let me try."

"It does seem the most logical solution," Spock replied slowly, hope that Jim might somehow be saved against all the odds flooding his thoughts. He stood up. "Come, gentlemen. Let us go and arrange a uniform for Mr. Karon."

No more than twenty minutes later, the transporter, operated by Spock, put Karon down on the surface of Chadris, in the woods outside the small township. In the middle of these woods was situated the disused, hidden mine where, according to Werne and his sister, Kurth and his men had made their headquarters, and where Captain Kirk was now being held.

If anyone had chanced to pass by on the narrow road through the woods, they would have thought the Klingon officer they met to be no different from any other; Karon needed no more than the minimum of disguise.

He carried a standard Klingon disrupter, but underneath his uniform was concealed his more trusted phaser, and the vital stun grenade. It was a weapon which had been almost phased out; it had been superseded by the phaser and other weapons more efficient and less drastic on the nervous system. If all went well, and his mission succeeded, he, the Klingons and the Captain would wake up with very nasty headaches indeed. But crude as the weapon might be, it was his only hope of saving his Captain, and probably of coming back alive himself. Yet although he knew the danger that faced him, not once did Karon think of turning back; the Enterprise was his home now, even if not all aboard her had come to accept him fully as yet, and James Kirk was her Captain; a man worthy of risking his life for, and a man to whom Karon owed a great deal. Karon also owed a great deal to the First Officer, and he was not so blind that he could not see the friendship that existed between the two. And if Spock of Vulcan had found such a friend, perhaps there was yet hope that one day a Klingon/Human hybrid named Karon might not be so lonely. Whatever happened, Karon did not want to have to go back and tell Spock that he had not been able to save his Captain and friend. Into the darkness under the trees, Karon strode grimly on.

It was indeed growing dark; the days on Chadris were short, and growing shorter as the winter drew on. A chill wind sprang up, and soon isolated snowflakes began to drift downward through the bare outlines of the trees. The woods were an easy place to lose one's bearings in, and Karon had only Werne's and Wandel's descriptions of the path he must take to find where the mine lay hidden. From what they had told him, he doubted that he would be able to discover a place so well concealed as the old workings apparently were on his own. All he could hope for was to find the right area, and then hope that the Klingons would discover him and take him inside. He assumed they must all have been lying low inside when the sensor sweep of the planet's surface had been made; or they would have been discovered. He could only pray that the Klingons saw the wisdom of mounting a guard outside the mine once the immediate hue and cry following the disappearance of the Captain had died down. He certainly hoped so, or he would be walking in circles round the desolate wood all night.

But Karon's luck was in - or out, depending on how you happened to look at it. He was just approaching the area where he was certain the mine entrance lay, when out of the darkness between the trees a harsh voice sounded, demanding in Klingonese who he was and what he was doing there.

Karon halted, carefully keeping his hands far enough away from the disrupter so that his challenger could see that he meant no threat, but not so far away that he could not reach his hidden phaser if the need arose. He waited while a dark shape detached itself from the undergrowth and approached him.

"Well?" the Klingon demanded in Karon's native tongue. "Who are you, and what is your business here? I advise you to speak quickly!"

Obviously the guard had not seen through his disguise or he would be dead. Karon drew himself up proudly and spoke in the tone of a Klingon officer just badly insulted by a subordinate.

"My name is Kanoth," hissed Karon angrily, "and have you not seen my rank? Take me to your commanding officer immediately, or my displeasure will grow!"

The guard looked at him uncertainly; he was under strict orders to let no-one near their hiding place. But surely that did not apply to a Klingon officer?

"Will you risk also the displeasure of Kurth when he discovers you did not take an officer carrying important new orders to him immediately?" Karon growled menacingly; he sensed the guard's uncertainty. He was within a hair's-breadth of overcoming the first obstacle.

The guard capitulated; he did not want to risk Kurth's anger. "Very well, sir - follow me, but quietly. The Chadris fools are no problem to us, but the Earthers are not so easily deceived. Yet we shall deal them a heavy blow!"

The guard went off into the night, happy with his violent thoughts; Karon followed, his thoughts calm and determined, his sudden anger ice-cold and controlled. If the Klingons thought the blow they would deal would be the death of Captain Kirk, then they were wrong! Above in the Enterprise, sensors were monitoring him, waiting for the moment when he entered the Klingon's stronghold. Spock was waiting, and five minutes exactly after his life form readings were undetectable due to the depth he reached, the Vulcan and a large Security team would beam down and bring him, the Captain, and the Klingons out of the mine, hopefully unconscious by then.

It was something to be said for Captain Kirk that the Security team was composed entirely of volunteers; apparently Karon was not the only member of the crew who thought the Captain was worth risking life and limb for. The Doctor too was waiting for the signal; his presence might well be needed, but Karon thought he would likely have found some reason for coming even if that had not been so. Karon had the feeling that Spock and McCoy both wished they had been able to do what Karon was doing. He hoped, for their sakes, that Kirk was not already dead.

The mine entrance was concealed behind a large rock slab, which slid sideways into the cliff face they had suddenly come upon; it was so well concealed that Karon might have searched for hours had he not stumbled upon the guard. He followed the guard inside, and was careful to note how the Klingon operated the door to close it.

Deeper and deeper into the mine they went, through tunnels lit only by the searchlight the guard carried, further and further on until Karon knew they were beyond the range of the Enterprise sensors. Now he had five minutes; five minutes to find the Captain, make sure that the Klingons, or most of them, were all gathered together, or somehow put the others out of action, then use the grenade. Many factors might yet work against him; Karon forced himself not to think about that.

At least two more minutes passed before they came upon anyone else; deep in the heart of the planet the tunnels ended, and they came upon three more Klingons guarding the entrance to a larger chamber.

"An officer to see Commander Kurth!" the guard barked at the other three. Then he turned and headed back towards the surface before anyone could accuse him of neglecting his duties.

"Well? I have new orders for your Commander," Karon snapped before any of them could say anything, "I demand to be taken to him at once!"

He walked past them unhindered into the brightly lit chamber; there were several more Klingons, including a particularly nasty specimen who was obviously Kurth, and there, also, the person he had been hoping to see; tied hand and foot, lying awkwardly in a corner, but still alive, was James Kirk.

"Well?" snapped Kurth. "What is the meaning of this intrusion?" Kurth was clearly not the type to be impressed by the appearance of another officer. In fact, he looked downright suspicious.

"I am Kanoth, Commander," Karon began in what was, he hoped, the correct

haughty tone. "I have been sent from Klingon with vital new orders." In the corner he saw Kirk's head jerk upwards at the sound of his voice. He knew his Captain would have the sense not to give the game away, and he was glad that he knew help was on the way. He had also seen for the first time the bruises his Captain had received. Karon was hard put to it to suppress mounting fury.

"Orders, what orders?" demanded Kurth, coming closer. "There was to be no contact until after the Farthers have left! Their ship must not detect us! Quickly, tell me those orders, and show me your authority!"

How much longer could he bluff? He had no papers to show Kurth, and there was at least ninety seconds to go before the security team from the Enterprise started beaming down. He had to be sure they were there to mop up any Klingons left on guard outside; the one he had met was surely not the only one. Involuntarily, his hand moved nearer his phaser.

"Give me that!" Kurth misinterpreted his gesture and snatched away the disrupter. "There is something about you, Kanoth. Have I not seen you before? If you do not show your authority and tell me those orders within ten seconds I will kill you, you and that Farther over there whose death I had hoped to make entertaining. I will not allow my mission to fail for anything!"

Suddenly Karon was in deadly fear of being recognised; he thought he had seen Kurth before; he was sure the Klingon had been one of those involved in the destruction of the hybrids. He would have to make his move soon. Out of the corner of his eye he could see James Kirk regarding him intently.

"My orders are to instruct you not to destroy the Farther installation. Our scientists wish to examine them." It was never meant to be anything more than a bluff, but just at that moment Karon wished they had thought up something better.

"What?" shouted Kurth. "Our scientists know already all they need to know about solar power! Do not lie to me!" Then Kurth came nearer Karon, his voice taking on an ice-cold, menacing tone. "Your lies are as unconvincing as you are; there is something not right about you. I have seen you before, I know I... You are the traitor Karon!"

At the moment of recognition Kurth whipped out his disrupter and fired; but Karon had been ready, and dodged, rolling away across the dirt floor, reaching for the grenade as he came to his feet again.

From the corner Kirk watched helplessly as the Klingons all turned their disrupters on him and Karon.

But Karon was not finished; he had the stun grenade in his hand, and threw it in the middle of the group of Klingons before they could fire their weapons, then threw himself on top of Kirk in an attempt to protect him.

The horrified Klingons turned and tried to grab the grenade; but they had no chance. It had only a two-second fuse.

Spock and the rescue party came anxiously into the underground chamber several minutes later. They did not need to search for which of the unconscious Klingon bodies belonged to Karon; they knew it would be the one who had tried to protect Kirk the best way he could.

"...and when I realised the 'officer' was Karon, I thought I was going crazy!" Kirk was walking away from Sickbay with Spock and McCoy, having finally persuaded the good Doctor that he was fit for duty. "I can't understand Klingonese, and when he pulled out that grenade, I thought he was the one going crazy. But he did save my life."

"He did, Jim," agreed McCoy wholeheartedly. "And he also saved you from the worst effects of that stun grenade. Which is why you're going back to duty while he's still in Sickbay with a blinding headache."

"You plan to treat the Klingons in the Brig, Doctor?"

"I do, Spock," replied McCoy with feeling. "I am not having them on the loose in my Sickbay. Do them good to suffer a few headaches, after what they planned to do to Jim!"

"Bones!" exclaimed Kirk, laughing. "That doesn't sound like the ship's surgeon of the Enterprise talking. And I don't suppose the Organians are going to be too happy with them when they find out what they've been up to."

"Indeed, Captain," Spock put in. "But at least there is one advantage gained out of this episode; the Chadris wish to join the Federation now they know we can protect them from the Klingons. It seems they had never heard of the Organians or the Treaty."

"Another advantage to come out of this is the way the crew is feeling about Karon now," Kirk added thoughtfully. "And from what he said to me a little while ago, I think he's finally found a place where he can settle, at least for a while. I'm glad; he's a good man. But then the Enterprise does seem to have that effect on people."

"Yes, Jim," said McCoy, smiling at the look Kirk and Spock had exchanged at Kirk's words. "And I think he has another reason for wanting to stay as well. He said he's thinking of growing a real beard; apparently Jane Yarrow told him she liked him in one."

The three friends parted; Kirk heading for the Bridge, still chuckling at what McCoy had told him. Spock too was due on the Bridge in a few moments, but McCoy held him back, saying he wanted to ask him about something.

"Yes, Doctor," asked the Vulcan. "What was it you wished to know?"

"Actually, Spock, I wanted to have a word with you about Karon," replied McCoy. "Jim's right; he has settled in; in fact, he almost seems a different person from the confused, mixed-up lieutenant we picked up a few weeks ago. And I'm sure he started to react more normally from the time you had that talk with him. Come on, Spock - just what was it you said to him?"

"I merely informed him that the key to integrating his personality was in acceptance of his two sides, not in suppression of one," Spock replied honestly.

"Oh," ventured McCoy, surprised and yet pleased by Spock's openness. "I'm glad that you had some answers for him; for yourself as well. And you know Jim's glad about that." Spock didn't reply, and McCoy couldn't make the moment last any longer. "But you know, Spock," he continued, a wicked grin appearing on his face, "it was Karon's Klingon side he wanted to suppress; he wanted to be Human. There has to be something in that!"

"Doctor," replied Spock, completely deadpan, "you must remember Karon had to choose between Klingon and Human. Had he needed to choose between Human and Vulcan, he would naturally have made the logical choice."

"Spock! That was a joke!" McCoy was delighted at succeeding in his provocation.

"But it seems I may have been of help," Spock continued, ignoring McCoy's comment. "And perhaps Karon may find a home among the stars. A home and friends."

"As you have, Spock?" McCoy couldn't resist.

"Indeed, Doctor."

Something in Spock's tone told McCoy that Spock was admitting publicly that he, as well as Jim Kirk, was included in that statement.

The Vulcan turned to follow his Captain and friend to the Bridge. A touched McCoy watched him go, realising that he hadn't had the last word again. And this time, he didn't care at all.